

A Love Letter

Scripture: Philippians 1:1-18

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Paul's Letter to the Philippians is perhaps his most serene letter. It is a letter filled with gratitude and deep emotion, the affection that he felt for that congregation. It was obviously his favorite congregation; they had a very special relationship. He wrote this letter from prison, probably in Rome, and having had time to reflect and to sort things out, he wanted them to know how it was with him, and in the course of the letter he expressed this very deep, affectionate relationship he had with this congregation. Some have called it an Epistle of Joy; some speak of it as a Prison Epistle, but I would like to call it this morning a love letter. It's a love letter from Paul to the Church of Philippi, and I use it as an occasion to send you a love letter today.

On the 19th of May, when you as a congregation voted to determine our future, I tried to keep my integrity by pointing out that the issue was not to be determined on the basis of a historic relationship to a denomination, nor on the basis of a personal relationship to a pastor, that the issue was larger than that. That the issue had to do with the nature of community, the nature of *this* community. And it would not have been appropriate for me to preach this morning's sermon then, because that larger issue needed to be set forth and you had to express yourselves. But, having expressed yourselves so clearly, let me this morning come back to say the relationship between pastors and people is not unimportant. In fact, it is absolutely critical for the free flow of God's Spirit and the fruitfulness of the Gospel in the lives of God's people. The relationship between pastors and people is a very critical relationship and has everything to do with whether or not the blessing of God will rest on a work. And so, this morning I want to speak to that. And I want to use Paul's love letter as a love letter to you, and I'm going to begin where he began when he says, "I thank my God on every remembrance of you." There he is in prison, having time to think. And when he thinks of Philippi, those people gathered there through his founding ministry, that people who had continued over the years to minister to him, he said to them, "I thank my God on every remembrance of you."

Paul was quite clear on a number of occasions in his various epistles that he understood his ministry as a gift of God. He was very clear that this was not something that he had chosen himself or that somehow or other rested upon him,

Paul, or his particular gifts. No, Paul was gifted with ministry. Throughout all of his struggles he never lost sight of the fact that it was God Who had called him, and he felt a tremendous sense of gratitude to be so chosen. But he also knew that he couldn't carry on ministry alone. He was totally dependent on the shared ministry with the people. And so, when he thinks of Philippi, he says:

"I thank my God in every remembrance of you, for your sharing, your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now."

Paul was one of those people who was blessed with being able to follow his passion. And I can identify with Paul on that. How fortunate a person is when one is following in one's profession or vocation the passion of one's life, when what one does, one would have to do in order to be true to oneself.

Paul, well, Paul probably should have had some psychoanalysis. They would probably have come up with the fact that he was dealing with some deep, dark secret of his past or that he was a workaholic, or that he was too single-focused, or whatever. Paul had a lot of warts and, as I've often said, I don't know if I'd like him as my roommate. And I guess I'd have to confess the same. I could put it colloquially, as Nancy does, and just say, "Well, you're a little sick." But, it is a fortunate thing when one does what one would have to do anyway. When one is able to do in one's work that which is the bliss of one's life. So, when Paul thinks of that and thinks of how the Philippian congregation has been partnering with him through the years in the Gospel, he simply expresses his gratitude, obviously with deep affection. He says, "Thank you. Thank you for enabling me to fulfill my calling and sharing with me this ministry of the Gospel."

That is a very, very great gift, and I have spent, out of the last 36 years, 29 of them here. Wonderful years. And you must know that not every pastor has had that kind of experience. Do you know how much pain there is out in the Church? How much brokenness there is between pastor and people? An old, old friend of mine with two years to go was asked by his congregation to leave just a couple months ago. Can you imagine what it would be to feel one called of Christ to give one's whole self to Christ in the ministry of the Church over all one's years and to come to that point and to have a people say, "We don't value that ministry anymore. Please leave. You have two years to go; we'll pay you for one." So, I don't take for granted what we've shared together. I thank God for it. It is a wonderful gift. In fact, it's rare.

And Paul says, "Thank you." And he says, *"The source of my confidence is the thing that we have done together, a good work that was begun by God and will be brought to completion by God."* Paul again, not only always understood that his ministry was a gift from God, but also that he was engaged in that in which God had been the beginning and God would be the end, and God would sustain in the meantime. *I am confident of this very thing - that God Who has begun a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*

The day of Jesus Christ. That is, the end of the age. Paul was proclaiming that Gospel throughout the ancient empire because he believed that at any moment the heavens would open and the Son of man would appear. It didn't happen that way, but that wasn't the point. Paul simply said that which I think we can appropriate for ourselves - God began it, God will end it - whenever the end is. In the meantime, God will sustain it. It is a good work and we can trust God for it. I am confident of this very thing- *confident* from a couple of Latin words, the prefix *con* and the word *fides*, with faith. "*I labor with faith.*" We can with faith be certain that that which has begun will be brought to completion by the God Who will be with us in the meantime. This good work is of God.

We had a good preacher here last week. Stimulating and inspiring message. And then he went off with us, as you know, with the Team and a few others, for a couple of days of theological reflection. And when I introduced him on Monday morning, I said, "You know, when someone calls and asks me to do something two months, three months, six months down the road, and I say, 'Yes, I'll do that. I'll go there,' and then it comes to the time, you pack your bags and you say, 'Why did I say Yes?'" And Dr. Hall said, "I said to my wife, 'Do you think I could still get out of this? Where is Spring Lake? Who are these people, anyway? Why did I say Yes?'"

Well, he was a wonderful man in our midst, and in his second presentation on the last day, he said, "I must say to you what I can very seldom say - I have received more than I have given. I would give anything if my own four children, now grown, had been exposed to a community like this." And in the last Communion, the tears streaked down his cheeks, and Jim VanHoeven, Gord's brother, took him and Dr. Ernest Campbell to the airport, and Jim told me later this week that the three of them spoke together about you, about this community. They represent involvement and engagement with the Church international and, Jim said, the three of them said to each other, "We do not know of another place like Christ Community." Douglas Hall said, "What you have here is unique."

I share that with you because otherwise, how are you to know? That is an unsolicited testimonial from those who have wide exposure and have come here and have sensed you, and they simply confirm what Paul said about Philippi. That this is a good work. God began it. God will bring it to completion. God will sustain it in the meantime. I am confident of this - with faith that's liberating, that sets one free to give oneself, that sets one free to relax.

Part of our human problem, all of us, not just ministers of the Gospel, all of us, is that we suffer from that too-self-important complex, that old indispensability complex. Every once in a while I have to face it myself, "You know, this isn't your work, finally. This is God's work." I have to remember the story of the old English bishop lying awake on his bed, wide-eyed in the middle of the night, worrying about all the cares of the Church and all the troubles of the world and it was as if

he heard the voice of God saying, "You can go to sleep now, Bishop. I can handle it."

Thank God, God can handle it, and I can relax a bit. It need not be a burden; it need not be a monkey on our back. God calls us to be confident and to laugh and to delight and to give ourselves freely, because, finally, it is not our cleverness. Thank God it's not our dedication. It has nothing to do with our perfection. It is simply the fact that God has gifted us with a good work and God will see it through. Thank God.

It doesn't mean it's always easy. It wasn't easy for Paul, either. He wasn't blowing bubbles under a clear blue sky. He was in prison. He was in prison for God's sake. Go on in the first chapter and you will find that he's contemplating the outcome of his trial in the imperial court, will he live or will he die? It's not even clear what he would prefer. "It's probably good for me to remain and keep working with you but, on the other hand, to depart and to be with Christ - I'm sort of torn." So, he's not writing to us out of some ivory tower. He's writing to us at a point in his life when his life is at stake, and he says to them, "Look, I want you to know that the thing that happened to me has turned out for the increased spread of the Gospel." Isn't that an irony? "The thing that's happened to me" - Paul is no victim; Paul is no self-pity party pooper - Paul is simply saying, "Look, what has happened to me has resulted in the increase of the Gospel. Why, the whole imperial guard has heard my story." (He must have had some freedom, maybe house arrest. Talked to his captors, told them about Jesus, some of them perhaps believed.) And then he says, "Some of the brothers and sisters who never opened their peeper before are starting to talk about Jesus. With new boldness, they're speaking the Gospel."

At the last Elders' Meeting I had to smile at one who took the back of the bulletin, our Identity Statement, and said, "I clipped that out and I put it in my Franklin Planner. And now, when I'm talking with people, I pull it out and say, 'Look, read this.'" She said, "I'm not that kind of a person. You know, God forbid that I should witness for Jesus. God forbid that I should ever pass out a tract. Here, I find myself saying, 'Look, read this!'"

New boldness, new freedom, something to say. Paul said, "This thing that has happened to me, why it's led to telling the story to the whole imperial guard, it has led to brothers and sisters speaking boldly the name of Jesus." "Oh," he said, "there are a few who aren't too unhappy that I'm in prison. They're preaching, too, out of a sense of selfish ambition in rivalry with me." But then, there's this amazing statement - "So what? So what? Some are preaching Christ out of love for Christ. Some are preaching Christ with something less than noble motivation. So what, then?"

Isn't that a great question? Isn't that a great question not only for Paul in prison but for all of us in so many circumstances of our lives, when we are at the point of where the ego might be bruised a little or we might lose the argument, or we

might be shown up or this or that, or not make the point? Isn't it a great question to say, "So what, then?"

Most of our life we get all exercised about things that are not of ultimate importance, anyway. The posture of grace of the Apostle is a great posture to emulate, and his secret was obvious - passionate, single-focused, heart drenched with gratitude, spirit bathed in love. This man said, "You can't hurt me. Anyway, all I really care about is that Christ be proclaimed and exulted. So whether by those that love me or those that love me less - so what? What's the big deal? Christ is preached. I rejoice!"

Wouldn't we all be a lot better off if in all the circumstances of life we could take ourselves a little less seriously? We could say with Paul, "But, what then? But, what then?"

Ah, Paul should be reason enough for us to know that it's not always easy in the Church. The team was given a copy of this book of prayers and meditations of someone who has gathered them, particularly for people in ministry. I heard these words and I had so wished that I had written them.

How baffling you are, O Church. And yet how I love you. How you have made me suffer, and yet how much I owe you. I should like to see you destroyed, and yet I need your presence. You have given me so much scandal, and yet you have made me understand sanctity. I have seen nothing in the world more devoted to obscurity, more compromised, more faults. And I've touched nothing more pure, more generous, more beautiful. How often I have wanted to shut the doors of my soul in your face. And how often I have prayed to die in the safety of your arms. No, I can't free myself from you, because I am you, although not completely. And where should I go?

I wish I had said that, in terms of the larger Church, but I need not say that in terms of you. Thank God it has been different here and we, in this experience together, have been bonded with love, more acute in our understanding, more intentional in our action. And so, we can say it's been a bit rough. But what has happened is resulting in the increase of the Gospel, and what has happened - so what?

Let me be very clear this morning. Thank you. I love you very much.