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A Heart Full of Thanksgiving Philippians 1:3-11

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This Sunday before Thanksgiving I am especially thankful to for the gift of love and mercy God has given in Jesus, and for the love of my family, friends, and church. One of the things that happened after my mom died was that I received probably close to 200 cards, letters, and emails from people expressing their love, concern, compassion, thoughts, and prayers. Some came from people I don't even know personally. I also have a file in my desk here at church where I have what I call, "keepers," letters, cards, and emails that people have sent me that have touched me deeply. It is nice to be able to go back and re-read nice cards and letters. I hope you have saved ones that have meant a lot to you so you can read them again also.

This is also something we do as Christians. A significant portion of the New Testament is composed of letters by the Apostle Paul. Paul wrote letters to specific congregations, he didn't have the universal church in mind nor was he thinking about how 21st century people in North America would respond to them. It is the inspiration and specific teaching of those letters that have caused us to still read them to hear guidance for our lives today. Around the year 62, Paul was imprisoned in Rome and it was from there he wrote to the church in Philippi. Paul had a special relationship with the church in Philippi. Together they had been partners in giving, receiving, working, and rejoicing in what God was doing through them. Now Paul, their church founder, was in prison facing the threat of death. He hopes to be reunited with them once again, but the chance of that is not looking good. Whether he is with them or not, he writes to encourage them to continue to live out the gospel together in their community. The letter begins with a greeting and then words of thanksgiving. In verses 3-6, Paul expresses gratitude for his relationship with the church in the **past**.

In verses 7-8, he shares his affection for them in the **present**.

In verses 9-11, he concludes his thanksgiving with a prayer for the church's **future**. Let's listen:

³ I thank my God every time **I remember you**, ⁴ **constantly praying with joy** in every one of my prayers for **all of you**, ⁵ because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

⁷ It is right for me to think this way about **all of you**, because you hold me in your heart,^d for **all of you** share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I long for **all of you** with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

⁹ **And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰ to help you to determine what is best**, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹ having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."

Paul begins the letter by pouring out his heart in gratitude to God for all God has done and is continuing to do. Paul's prayer begins with thanksgiving, not with asking for anything. In circumstances that could understandably breed doubt, despair, even bitterness, Paul remembers all God has done and all he has experienced and he is grateful. The depth of Paul's faith and his approach are inspiring. He is trying to assure close friends who are worried about his being in prison and facing death that he has not been robbed of his joy. Ironically, when Paul and Silas first came to Philippi they were arrested, beaten, and thrown in prison. Their response then was to pray, sing hymns, and to witness to other prisoners and to the jailer who came to faith and whose entire family was baptized. Paul's imprisonment then and at present helps to advance the gospel. Being in prison did not stop Paul nor the gospel, just as it failed to crush but in some ways served as an incubator John Bunyan, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, or Terry Anderson to name a few.

By focusing on God's grace, the good news of the gospel, and giving thanks, we can experience joy and contentment even in the midst of difficult circumstances. Paul is confident that God was with them in the beginning of their ministry together, and God will be with them to the end, even to the day of Jesus Christ's return. Paul is able to believe that even the most difficult moments can be transformed by God's grace.

Beginning with thanksgiving, as Paul does, is good advice for our prayers individually and in church. By reminding ourselves first of the gift of God's grace and the gospel, we are constantly reminded of our reasons for thankfulness. Paul is thankful as he remembers the church with **joy and confidence, and he longs for them with the**

^d Or *because I hold you in my heart*

affection or compassion of Christ, a love that is more than human affection. In our prayers for other Christians, how much time do we spend thankfully remembering them in joy, confidence and in love? This is an area we can probably grow in. Praying for others with thanksgiving is both good for the relationship and for strengthening faith. A Christian named Meister Eckhart wrote, *“If the only prayer you ever say in your life is ‘thank you,’ that would be sufficient.”*

Paul was able to remember and give thanks for the church this way because they had expressed their commitment to the Lord and to each other by **sharing** in the work of the gospel through their prayers, mutual ministry, and their generous giving. They have labored and fellowshiped together to further the gospel and through the work they’ve shared God has drawn them closer together.

Is there someone you could write or call and tell them you’re praying for them with thanksgiving for how they have shared in your life? How does it feel to receive a card, email, or letter like that? It is like pulling into a gas station on the emotional road of life and having our tank filled and then the attendant who filled our tank says, *“It’s on us; have a great day.”* And we drive out with a smile on our face, the radio turned up louder, our heart a bit lighter, and our foot a little heavier on the accelerator because we’re ready to keep on going down the road of life. We need these emotional pit stops even more than our cars need gasoline – which is why we react differently to a card that is personally addressed to us from a friend and a credit card solicitation. Email ads that invade our inbox are instantly eliminated without being opened, but a personal expression or thanks or appreciation is read, saved and read again.

We live in an age of entitlement, of increased and often highly unrealistic expectations, a time when cynicism, negativity, rudeness, and anger are a part of everyday life. This is so much the case that sometimes even Christians who are in situations far more comfortable than a Roman prison have difficulty expressing themselves or their opinions in ways that are appropriately respectful, humble, considerate, appreciative, kind, and thankful. That is the danger of writing something down, it preserves whatever was said and our mood or emotional state at the time for anyone to see. This kind of correspondence is like someone letting the air out of our tires or putting a small hole in our emotional fuel tank – it drains us and slows us down.

Paul begins with thanksgiving and helps the church to feel encouraged and loved before he expresses anything else. Whenever we are going to share any kind of suggestion or comment with someone that may involve possible improvements or

changes we think need to be considered in their work, behavior, or in a relationship – following Paul’s example is wise. Begin with thanksgiving – specific, tangible, honest thanksgiving and then share with humility for their consideration what might make it even better. All of us are far more willing to listen when spoken to in that way, yet too often we fail to speak that way ourselves.

Paul begins with thanksgiving for his **past relationship** with the church and then assures them of his great affection for all of them **in the present**. Did you notice how frequently Paul used the word “**all**” when speaking of his relationship with the church? (Review verses 4, 7, 7b, 8). Paul’s apparent need to convince the church that he was praying for all of them; that he thought of all of them with the love of Jesus; that he held them all in his heart; that he longed for all of them - seems to indicate there was a problem within the church. We don’t know the specifics of all the problems causing the sense of division within the church, but we know from elsewhere in the letter that people are disagreeing with each other, and Paul is urging people to have the same humble mind as Jesus and assuring them of his affection.

Throughout this year and especially in these last two months we have prayed, served, given and worshipped and we have been able to bless many people in the process. I am truly thankful for you all and proud of you as well. My heart is full of thanksgiving for all of you and for the love and compassion you have shared with me since my mother’s death. I am thankful that I always told my mom that I loved her. She especially saved the Mother’s Day cards I wrote after Nathan and Greg were born because I wrote very specifically my thanks for all she did and sacrificed. It is always hard when someone we love dies, but there is some solace to be taken if we have let our feelings be known and if we have not held back words of thanks. Paul knew this as well.

Finally, Paul shares a prayer of intercession for the future. Paul prays that the Philippians will **grow and mature in love**. Not a love that is sentimental and easy; not a love that shrinks from truth-telling and tough engagement; but **a love that is joined to knowledge and understanding**, to probing and discerning, to putting itself to the test in real-life situations and loving even when it is difficult. Paul writes, “*This is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best.*” He’s praying the church will have deep knowledge (*epiginosko*) and discernment (*aisthese*) or common sense.

Prayerful love combined with knowledge and discernment enables us to determine what is best. We all know that the time between now and New Year's can be either wonderful or very stressful or even some of both. Family relationships and dynamics can be especially challenging during the holidays. For those of us who have lost loved ones this year, the first Thanksgiving and Christmas can be difficult. Some of us will have an empty chair at our table on Thursday because of the loss of a loved one, but maybe this year it would be good for all us to place an empty chair at our tables to remember both our own loved ones as well as the many families who are grieving and finding it hard to give thanks. But as we look at that empty chair, may we rejoice at the life or lives that touched ours in special ways and may we look around the table to see those who are still present and sharing their love and life with us.

Give thanks and remember God's grace and mercy in the past.
Give thanks for love and ministry that is shared at present.
Pray for continued growth in love and knowledge so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless,
having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."

Blessing:

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing,

Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." 1

Thessalonians 5:16-18

In a sense, being part of a church is like being in a marriage. Jill and I had six sessions of premarital counseling before we were *engaged*. Dr. Homer Jernigan shared with us that a healthy marriage is guided by two important principles. First, marriage is two growing people in a growing relationship. Both persons need to be growing as individuals and their relationship must also be growing. If only one person is growing, then eventually the couple will grow apart and the relationship will falter. Similarly, in the church, if some people are growing in love and knowledge and others are not, that results in relationships that are strained.

The second principle is marriage is a commitment to work things out together. Marriage is a partnership of equals. Sometimes in a marriage difficulty can arise from a host of sources: communication, trust, a desire for power and control over the other person, unfaithfulness, different priorities and dreams, or the sharing of responsibilities. *“What do you mean the sink is full of dirty dishes? There are still clean spoons in the drawer.”* Just like in a healthy marriage, there are times in the life of the church when our relationships require a commitment to work things out together.

((I received an email this week from former BBC member Bob Pearson who served this church faithfully for many years chairing the Board of Deacons, on the pastoral search committee that called me, on the first capital campaign for this new building and in other ways. Bob’s email actually is structured like Paul’s letter. He began with remembering and thanksgiving, *“I haven’t bothered you with emails for quite awhile, but you have been in my thoughts and prayers continually. You will never know how much I appreciated your ministry, prayer time together, and service in the Lord together. I have enjoyed listening to your sermons on the Internet. It means so much more than reading them. I can catch the inflections and emphasis much better. The nuances of your purpose become much clearer.”* Bob shared the idea with their pastor in Florida that he consider putting his sermons on their website.

Bob wrote of some other things and said, *“I guess in many ways you have had a trying couple of years. It is not easy to manage a growing church and the conflicts it presents as well as the joys. My prayer for you I found in Philippians 1:9-11. He has answered that prayer as you came to BBC and I am sure will carry you through.”*

Bob expressed gratitude, thanksgiving, affection, intercession, and then closed by asking for prayer for himself – just like Paul. I wrote him back and said, *“You’ll never guess what passage I’m preaching on this coming weekend, Philippians 1:9-11.”* Bob’s

letter was a practical example of doing exactly what Paul is doing and what he is encouraging the church to do.)))