

May 22

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Philippians 1:1-18a

“That Your Love May Overflow”

1. As we go to graduations and celebrate graduates this time of year, we ourselves look back and cherish our own memories from high school and college
 - a. I delight in looking at my pictures from back then, and getting together with friends and sharing stories.
 - b. Also as it happens, I have kept a few dozen letters I received from when I first came to the States, letters from my friends back in Mexico.
 - c. Looking at those pictures and reading those letters and cards is like getting into a time machine
 - d. At times I feel like I am right back there, but at times I look at what my friends wrote and I honestly am re-encountering story lines I long forgot
 - e. They reference letters I had written them, responding to events I was telling them about, and I find myself trying to reconstruct what all I must have said.
 - f. I have a bad memory sometimes, which can be a bit of a challenge. You’d figure I would keep a journal to help me keep things straight, but I don’t
 - g. So reading these letters, these tangible memories fill in the gaps.
2. The letters Paul wrote several first century churches fill in gaps for us in a unique way, give us a glimpse at what it meant to be the church in the years after Jesus was raised
 - a. Paul had a special bond with the church in Philippi
 - i. He started this congregation somewhere around the year 50, so about 20 years after Jesus was raised.
 - ii. As we have seen over the past couple of weeks, Paul had been active in sharing the message of Jesus, in particular in areas beyond Palestine and with people who were Gentiles (not Jewish – although he preached in synagogues also).
 - iii. Paul had felt God calling him to go to Macedonia (present day Greece), and in one of those trips he and his mission partners started a new congregation in the city of Philippi
 - iv. He felt a great deal of pride in them, in their ministry
 - v. You can tell how proud he was by the way he begins this letter, with such joy and gratitude for them.
 - vi. And, as we read in the first few verses, Paul was in prison as he wrote this letter.
 - vii. Paul was imprisoned in more than one occasion, like in the passage from last week
 - viii. We’re not actually clear in what city he was imprisoned when he wrote the letter to the Philippians, but we learn in the letter that they had heard about this imprisonment and had dispatched one of the congregation members to bring some gifts and help look after Paul.
 1. Prison was a tough place and they made little provision for the prisoners, because the expectation was that friends and family would look after the prisoner’s needs

- ix. So there is Paul, in prison, and the Philippians are taking care of him, and so he writes them a letter.
- x. His gratitude is even more apparent when we consider that.
- b. We have several of the letters Paul wrote to the churches he either started or supported
 - i. Often Paul wrote to teach them, to encourage them
 - ii. There were times when Paul would write to correct them
 - iii. And there were times when he would have arguments with his opponents in the city where the church was, shadowboxing, as it were, trying to dismantle their arguments, and thus teach the congregation the right path to take
 - iv. These letters, by the way, were written to the entire congregation, and they were read in the context of worship
 - v. Think of it as an informal sermon in written form sent to be read by one of the church members
 - vi. This letter was meant to be solely that: a letter to one congregation, one he knows well, although some other letters of Paul are written to a much larger audience (even to believers he had not yet met, like the letter to the Romans)
- c. There is a strange bit at the end of today's passage
 - i. Paul says two interesting things: my being in prison has actually been good for the cause of spreading the gospel.
 - 1. Perhaps he meant that he had had the opportunity to be more and more vocal about why he taught what he taught
 - 2. Certainly it would be that he was getting more and more attention from the authorities, and was becoming a pain in their neck, which he saw as a chance to preach in bigger contexts
 - ii. He then also says that there are some preachers out there preaching Jesus, but out of a wrong motivation
 - 1. Here maybe he was referring to other leaders who, with Paul out of the picture maybe permanently, were trying to exert influence in the church Paul once established
 - 2. Paul doesn't seem too bothered.
 - 3. He figures their motives were pretty transparent, whether out of love or out of selfish ambition.
 - 4. Doesn't matter, Paul says: what's important is that people are learning about Jesus, that the message of the Gospel is powerful enough in itself to clean up less than pure motives, in the end.
 - 5. It's like saying: I don't care which church you go to, as long as you go to church – we'll trust God will guide you in the right path not based on who your preacher is but based on the power of the Spirit working in that person or even in spite of them.
- 3. Consider for a moment what you would write in a letter of encouragement to this congregation: what would you say?
 - a. As I have mentioned to you recently, the church's bicentennial anniversary is coming up in 2024
 - i. That year will be as good as any moment to look back and to look forward.

- ii. In a previous anniversary, a history book was written about the congregation
 - iii. It highlighted the work of pastors and leaders who've worked hard through its history
 - iv. Thinking about the letter to the Philippians, I think of it as an unintended time capsule, capturing the reality of the moment, and then looking at it now it is like traveling back in time to life then
 - v. What would the founding pastor or a former member write in a letter to encourage us today?
- b. If I were writing a letter to my home church in Monterrey, El Buen Pastor (Good Shepherd) I would want to thank them for teaching me to be curious about the Bible, and to be faithful in living out what Jesus had taught us
 - c. If I were writing a letter to the first church I served, First Pres in St. Anne, I would want to thank them for making the pastor I am by their example of graciousness, of community.
 - d. Maybe if you and I were writing a letter to First Columbus,
 - i. we'd thank those who stood up for what was right especially when it wasn't popular, whether it meant fighting for justice in the 70s for African Americans getting loans to buy a home here, or in the new millennium for LGBTQ students to thrive in our school system
 - ii. we'd appreciate the generosity of the congregation, which enabled the creation (or restoration) of the building, or which included hundreds of hours of volunteer work to help an Afghan family feel safe and at home here
 - iii. we'd remember the people who were our Sunday school teachers, and we'd know how important it is for us to take our turn (maybe one more time) to be teachers for our young people
 - e. And one key element of that letter, which we would copy from Philippians, is that it can't just be about looking backwards, padding them (or ourselves) on the back
 - i. The letter we write needs to propel us forward
 - ii. It's good to think about the past 200 years, but more important to focus on the next hundred years
 - f. What would you write this church we love so that it can feel the energy and the inspiration for ministry in the next hundred years?
 - i. The translation we used today said: *My prayer is that your love may abound more and more, both in understanding and in wealth of experience.*
 - ii. Another translation reads: *that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight.*
4. That's the letter we get to write, beloved, maybe on paper, but certainly with our faithful and fearless work following Jesus. May God, in all we do, use our actions, imperfect as they are, to proclaim God's grace which knows no bounds. So that our love may overflow.

Sources: *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Philippians* by Fred Craddock. Atlanta: John Knox Press. 1985.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/partnership-in-the-gospel-2/commentary-on-philippians-11-18a-3>

Harper Collins Study Bible

Reflection questions

1. Share a memory from early in your journey of faith and how someone you know helped you grow in your faith.
2. What do you make of the statement Paul makes that the motive of the preachers in Philippi didn't matter, so long as the Gospel was preached (1:12-18)?
3. What would you write in a letter to the congregation of First Presbyterian Columbus (let's say one which would be read to all during worship)?