

THE CHRISTMAS LETTER First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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12/10/06

Philippians 1:3-11 (NRSV)

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, 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.

THE CHRISTMAS LETTER

In our house we send out a Christmas letter to those people we don't get to visit very often. We try to fill it with news about what is going on in our family. In some cases we send a picture for those who don't know what we look like these days.

I can just imagine some people saying, "Would you look at how white Frank's hair has turned over these past few years! Is Christopher really that tall? Who is that good looking young man by Carrie? Oh, I remember she's married now. How time flies."

We have so many friends and former parishioners that we have to resort to a more formal letter to let them know all the news about our family. Sometimes as I look at the names on the list I wish we had the time to say something more personal. Every one of them has meant so much to us through the years. We send the Christmas letter in hopes that they will know that we still remember them and that we care for them and we want the best for them in the future.

Perhaps the best gift I receive all year is a note from someone who wants to thank me for something or encourage me in some way.

LETTERS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Have you received any of those letters of encouragement? I bet many of you remember at least one. What is the most encouraging letter you have ever received? I asked that question of my Bible studies and most people came up with a similar answer. They said something like,

"My most encouraging letter came when things were not going so well in my life, and a friend wrote a letter that changed everything." The power of an encouraging word is amazing.

I get e-mail and mail from former church members and friends from all over the country. Just recently I got a letter from a man who was in the church I served in North Carolina. He said, "I don't know if you remember me or not, but I wanted to write you and tell you how much I appreciated that time when you took the time to take me to the hospital."

Now this is something that happened almost twelve years ago, and yet he still remembered and gave thanks for that one act of ministry. He still remembered me. He still cared about me and my family. After twelve years he still was sorry that we were called to a different church.

That always lifts my spirits when I get a message of encouragement like that.

Occasionally I get an e-mail from someone who has been helped by a sermon. They write to thank me for the message, and they go on to tell me about what is going on in their life.

PAUL'S HEARTFELT LETTER

When I think about those letters of encouragement, I think about a phrase that the Apostle used in our lesson for today. Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians, "I hold you in my heart." (1:7)

Actually, the Greek phrase can be translated in two ways. It can be translated, "I hold you in my heart" as the NIV translates it or it can be translated "You hold me in your heart" as the NRS version translates it. Both translations tell the truth about the relationship Paul had with the church at Philippi.

It was a mutual admiration society. They were in each other's heart.

But, Paul now found himself in difficult circumstances. We learn in our lesson for today that he was in prison (1:7). And yet his first thoughts were not of prison and what he had been denied.

His first thoughts were of his friends in Philippi and the joy they had brought to his life.

Paul wrote, "I thank my God every time I remember you." Do you know someone like that? All you have to do is mention the name, and a smile comes to your lips, and you say to yourself,

"Thank God for that person. She has been a blessing to so many people. He has done some much for me. Thank God."

CAPTIVITY AND FRIENDSHIP

Often we do not appreciate the people in our life during the good times. When things are always going our way, we tend to live a very unreflective life and even complain about minor inconveniences.

But, when things get rough, when we lose what we once took for granted, then we begin to understand the importance of our friendships.

The great theologian, Karl Barth was once a chaplain to people in prison. And in response to that experience he once said, "Only in prison can the good news be heard with clarity."

He found that because the inmates had absolutely no control over their life they were ready to hear the gospel message. Captivity denies community. And yet the gospel has the power to draw us into community, even during those times when we are most isolated.

Paul found that even the memory of Christian community could sustain him in this time of imprisonment. When he remembered the blessings of past relationships, he was lifted above and beyond his present circumstances. He could give thanks and rejoice.

In fact, the words joy and rejoice are used over and over again in Paul's letter to the Philippians. The letter to the Philippians is the most positive letter that he writes in the New Testament.

Why? It is because Paul fills his "dead" time in prison by remembering the life-giving faith that was a part of that church. The church at Philippi had always been a joy to Paul and in his later years as he languished in prison it became even more important to him. The people and their faithful ways became a light of hope in a dark and difficult circumstance.

PHILIPPIAN MEMORIES

As he reflected upon his time at this church, Paul had no doubt that God had led him to Philippi. The Apostle had planned to go in a different direction on his missionary journey, but at Troas he had a vision. In that vision Paul saw a man who said, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And so he did. Paul, in obedience to that vision turned toward the west and a new mission was developed in Philippi.

As we look back upon our life, we remember those times when we could have gone left or right, here or there. And yet, for some reason God called us to go in a particular direction and that changed everything.

Think about how your life would have been totally different had you not been led to go in a particular direction. You may wish that you had done some things differently, but on those occasions you were truly open to God's leading; I bet you can see the hand of God at work as you look back on your life.

Paul's life and ministry were totally changed when he responded to this vision. He went to Macedonia, stopped in Philippi and the gospel came to that part of the world.

Most of you remember the story of the first converts. There was no synagogue in that area, but believers gathered outside the gate by the river.

One of those believers was a woman named Lydia, a businesswoman who loved and served God. She became a believer and invited Paul and Silas to stay at her home.

Lydia's hospitality was a harbinger of things to come. The Philippians proved to be a very generous people who took care of Paul's needs when he was with them and sent gifts for his support when he was away.

Of course, things didn't always go smoothly in his ministry. The Bible tells us about a slave girl who was possessed by a spirit. She was what we might call a fortune teller and this activity enriched her owners. But, Paul cast the evil spirit out of the girl, and that got him into trouble. Paul and Silas were thrown into prison because they had destroyed someone's business.

Paul could still remember what it was like to sing hymns with Silas at midnight while imprisoned that night. Despite the dire circumstances they somehow knew that they would be free. And sure enough God sent an earthquake that shook the prison. The chains fell off and the doors flew open.

The jailor thought that his life was over, that all the prisoners would escape, and they would blame him. But, it didn't happen that way. Everyone stayed in place.

Paul and Silas then told the jailer about Jesus. He believed, took the evangelists to his home, tended to their wounds, gave them something to eat, and then everyone in his house was baptized into the faith.

Paul would have never believed a story like that if he hadn't lived it himself. And as he sat in prison, he thought to himself, "I'm only here because God wills it. I know that if it would suit God's purpose, he would send another earthquake to open these doors and loose these chains. For some reason, this imprisonment will accomplish God's purpose."

And so Paul was content in whatever circumstance he found himself. (Philippians 4:12-13) It didn't matter if he had a lot or a little. He believed that God would lead him for the rest of the journey. And his joy and faith were bolstered by remembering the gracious ways of fellow Christians and the grace of God who allowed defeat to be turned into victory.

There are at least two important lessons for us in our Scripture for today that will help us when we find ourselves imprisoned by the circumstances of life.

REMEMBER AND GIVE THANKS

First, it is important to remember and give thanks for what God has already done in our lives. What people have been important to you? Perhaps you remember a particular teacher who ignited a passion in your life? Maybe there was a friend who was always there when you needed her?

It is important to remember those special people and those special times. It is important to "hold them in your heart" as the apostle Paul put it. Paul rehearsed the past. Paul remembered and gave thanks for the grace of God as it was revealed in his experiences with these faithful Christians at Philippi.

I have found that this is the most helpful thing I can do when I am depressed by the circumstances of life. I rehearse the blessings of the past. I remember people, some living and some dead, who were an important part of my life. And I give thanks for them. I remember them with joy. I "hold them in my heart."

Remembering in this way has a wonderful way of calming my anxieties about the future. Though the situations weren't as bad, I, like the apostle Paul can remember times when the situation in my life looked pretty bleak. Yet God used difficult circumstances, unlikely people and unexpected events to deliver me.

It gives me great joy to think about those people and those situations. When I think about how God delivered me in the past, I can have hope for the future. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, the one who has begun a good work in us will bring it to completion.

God might not use an earthquake to deliver us from our jail cell today, but he could. And while we're in that prison, God ministers to us through people who love us. We look forward to that day when God will wipe away every tear, but in the meantime God sends us brothers and sisters to do that in His stead.

That's why the story of the Bible is so important to us. It's the story of how God delivered his people in the past, and it's the promise that this same God will deliver His people in the future. Just as God freed his people from captivity in Israel and just as God raised Jesus from the dead, so one day we will be freed as well.

Sometimes in our sadness we are tempted to forget the past, to try and start all over again in an effort to escape the things that hold us back. But, I would suggest that the opposite needs to happen if the presence of God is to enter our life in a new way this Christmas season. Instead of forgetting the past we need to remember. We must embrace the pain in our life as well as the joy, and turn it all over to God.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

That brings me to the second point that this passage seems to make. The joy and salvation of the past points us toward a hope for the future. We need to remember the past, the good, the bad and the ugly.

But, we also need to remember how God helped us on our journey through that wilderness; we need to remember how He led us every step of the way. When we thought that we were lost he gave us guidance. When we thought that we were alone he gave us someone to be with us.

That same God is leading us today. The same God who brought wonderful people into our life, the people whose memory brings us joy ... that same God can once again lead us to a place of comfort and joy and service today. God is not finished with us yet.

There are still “miles to go before we sleep,” but the sacred past teaches us that they need not be weary miles of drudgery. They can be miles of purpose and hope.

Paul told the Philippians that this was just the beginning for them. There was more for them to do before their work was complete. (1:6)

And I think that the apostle would tell us the same thing during this Advent season. The promise of Advent is the promise of more to do, more to experience, and more to learn in the service of our Lord.

The coming of Christ is not a once and done deal.
The coming of the Spirit of Christ is a daily possibility.

The coming of God in Christ is a historical fact that we celebrate at Christmas.

But, the coming of Christ's Spirit is also a present reality and a future hope.

SACRAMENTAL ADVENT

You might say that Advent is a sacramental time. In the sacrament of the Lord's Supper we take the bread and drink the cup in remembrance of Jesus and the sacrifice he made on our behalf.

But, we also acknowledge that this same Jesus provides food and strength for the living of these days. Furthermore, this same Jesus provides hope for a heavenly banquet where people come from East and West, North and South to eat at God's table.

The promise of Advent is similar. We look back to the first coming of Christ. We recognize that the Spirit of Christ is present with us today. And we look forward to that Day when Christ comes to the world in power and glory.

A SPIRIT FOR PRISONERS

I think that the Spirit of Christ is especially close to us when we find ourselves in prison. I'm, by and large, speaking in a symbolic sense of course. I'm talking about those times when we find ourselves in a situation where there seems to be no way out.

This “prison” could be a prison of our own making or it could be a prison imposed upon us by others. It makes no difference. When circumstances bring us to the end of our rope sometimes we remember God’s saving ways in the past and find the courage to “let go and let God” in the present and future.

We learn once again the lesson that can only be taught by experience. “Underneath are the everlasting arms.” It’s like what the Psalmist once said (121) “The Lord will guard your going and your coming, now and for evermore.” Life has a safety net, the safety net of God’s promises as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Barth was right. In prison the good news can be heard with complete clarity. In prison we long for community, and God provides what we need. God brings us the joy of Christian community and the hope of salvation.

Many people here today find themselves in a prison of sorts. Some are imprisoned by grief. Some are imprisoned by a sense of personal failure. Some are imprisoned by their fears about the future. Some are imprisoned by poor health.

Without in any way minimizing the pain that you feel at this moment, I want to propose a way forward. Focus not upon the prison walls but upon the people and circumstances that point toward an eternal hope.

PRAYING THROUGH YOUR CHRISTMAS CARDS

This past week at Bible study I got a really neat practical tip on how to do this. We were talking about the importance of giving thanks for the people that God had sent into our lives, and one person said that she visited a family once that had an unusual practice at Christmas time. They used the prayer before the meal to take one Christmas card received from a friend or relative and then pray for that person as part of the meal time prayer.

I was really excited about that idea because it gives a very simple, practical way to put into practice our lesson for today. We’ve already tried it at our house.

We have the cards piled onto the table, and when we give thanks for that person in a prayer, the card is placed in a basket. I think I’m going to call it our Advent basket. It will be a basket of prayers for the people in our life, a thanksgiving basket of hope that will guide us into the Christmas season.

Perhaps you might like to try something like this as well. In the busy Christmas season we are often frustrated with so many things to do and not enough time to do them. But, Paul’s statement of thanksgiving reminds us that the most important things in our life are the people who have touched us.

They represent the hope of God. They are the incarnation of God’s love.

In one of our Bible study discussions about the Christmas letter one lady said, “Maybe in my letter this year I won’t complain so much about my broken golf cart and instead tell people how much I love them.”

I thought that was a good summary of our lesson. Instead of complaining about what is broken in our life, maybe we ought to give thanks for the people in our life who embody the grace of God.

May God help us all be instruments of His peace and love during this holy season.

Amen.

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