

May 25 - Partnership in the Gospel

Philippians 1:1-18a

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There's a certain formula for writing letters in the ancient world. It's not very complicated. A to B, greeting, perhaps a remembrance, body of the letter. So if I were to write to Char in that style, I'd begin my letter this way: "Mark, your husband to Char my beloved for whom I thank God. I hope you're well and having a good time in St. Louis." And then I'd get on with the body of the letter.

Paul pretty much uses this formula in every one of his letters. So when he departs from or embellishes the formula, we know that something special is going on. Paul does that when he writes to the Philippians. The letter starts out like almost all of his letters do: "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Standard stuff.

But then Paul begins to just overflow with affection. "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you." He specifically thanks the Philippians for their partnership in the Gospel. Sharing the Gospel, sharing who Jesus is is at the center of Paul's life. And how could it be otherwise? You remember how Paul was blinded and knocked off his horse one day on his way to Damascus. And how he heard the voice of Jesus calling to him, asking, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" That experience dramatically changed his life, and ever since his life was full of a passion to share the Gospel. So Paul is effusive in his thanks and prayers for and praise of the Philippians because they are partners with him in sharing the Gospel. And also because they have supported him in his imprisonment. The power of his joy cannot be overcome.

So Paul is confident that God is at work in those Philippians, and it gives him great joy.

He says he prays for each one of them constantly. And then he spells out what his prayer for them is: "that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, 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."

Did you catch that? It's not theological insight that leads to love; it's the other way around. It's love that leads to understanding of who God is; and it's love that leads to knowledge of who God is. It's like what I said last week: the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not far off and unknowable. Our God is known through the doing of mercy and justice and kindness. That's why every week we start our creed, our statement of belief of who God is this way: "Let us love one another that with one mind we may confess the Holy Trinity, one in essence and undivided.

So today I want to translate the opening of the letter to the Philippians into our situation here at

Living Water. I thank God for all of you for your partnership in the Gospel. I do not have a dramatic story like Paul does. But I, too, have a passion for the Gospel and its power to make this world a better place and the people in it better people. I am thankful for the people who make worship possible and who make it joyful. I am thankful for the musicians and the greeters and ushers and readers and those who provide a little bit of something to eat for afterwards. I am thankful for those who welcome the stranger and for those who live out their faith in quiet and unheralded ways each day. This living out your faith is both a vitally important witness and the highest theology. Speaking of theology, I am thankful for those who study and those who teach.

I am thankful for those who step up to leadership. Some have done so at difficult times, and without them where would we be? I am thankful for those who with bulldog insistence keep pressing forward in the difficult process of trying to sell our land. I am thankful for those who took part in the *Unbinding the Gospel* study and then put what they learned into practice. I am thankful for the women who do so much of the work that gets done. I am thankful to Bob that this space is neat and orderly and clean and ready and welcoming for worship each week no matter what happened in this space on Saturday.

I am thankful for Liz and Anne and Judy and for their predecessors and successors on church council and for those who sat around the table in our narthex last week to do some planning and goal setting so that the mutual ministry review we did will make a positive difference in our life together. I am thankful for those who come because every face, every voice added or missing is felt. I am thankful for those who care and those who lift up joys and thanksgivings and prayer concerns. And for those who take the blue pages home and pray for the people listed in them. I am confident that God is at work in you and will continue to be at work in you.

And my prayer for you is that you will continue to grow in love so that overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, 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.