



*I thank my God every time I remember you,  
praying with joy for our partnership in the gospel*

I love these words of greeting Paul wrote to the community in Philippi  
They are words I've often used to address this faith community,  
as I am full of gratitude for the ministry we do here together.  
The whole letter to the Philippians is full of gratitude and joy,  
and contains some of the most beautiful and beloved of Paul's writings.  
In the coming weeks we will be reading through this letter  
and exploring what Paul says about Christian community  
and the life we share in Christ.

In the book of Acts we read about Paul's work in Philippi.  
He went there in response to a vision,  
traveling for the first time into the European territory of Macedonia.  
He and his companion Silas met Lydia there, a seller of purple cloth,  
and she invited them to stay with her  
and hosted the first house church in Philippi.  
Paul and Silas were arrested there, beaten and imprisoned,  
and left the city after their miraculous prison break.

Now Paul is writing to the saints – the Christian community – in Philippi.  
He is writing to share news of his circumstance,  
and to thank them for their support – both relational and financial.  
Paul is again in prison – we don't know where he is or when the letter was  
written, but we know he was imprisoned at least four times after leaving Philippi  
In ancient times, prisoners relied on outside support for basics  
such as food, clothing and blankets to keep warm –  
none of that was provided for prisoners.  
Near the end of this letter we learn that Epaphroditus, a member of the  
Philippian church, has come to Paul with gifts for his time in prison.  
Paul is writing to thank the Philippian community,  
and to invite and encourage their continued support.

Letters such as this one would have been delivered by a person,  
who would probably have come directly from Paul  
and be able to share news and answer questions about his circumstances.  
It would have been read aloud to the gathered community,  
since few people in ancient times were able to read.  
In a time with no phone, no Zoom calls or Facetime or even recording devices,  
a letter such as this was an intimate communication,  
as if Paul himself had come to them to share the gospel.  
We can image the community listening together,  
reacting as they hear the news and encouragement Paul offers.  
It is helpful to remember that letters such as this  
were not written to be part of the bible,  
but to communicate between two parties in a particular time and place.  
We have only one side of the communication.  
Yet we have this letter now because the people who heard it valued it,  
shared it and preserved it, read it again and again,  
until it became a part of the canon of Christian scripture.



After his greeting, Paul continues his encouragement of the saints  
with these words: *I am confident that the one who began a good  
work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.*

These are such lovely, encouraging words for all of us  
engaged in the ministry of the gospel.

We want to hear the encouragement and promise  
that God supports and fulfills the work we do for the sake of the gospel  
And.

We've all known failures and disappointments in the work of ministry.

We may wonder – what do these words –

written by Paul to a particular group of people  
at a particular time in history - mean to us, as part of our scripture?

It's important to remember that completion of our good work  
may not look like what we had expected and hoped for.

Completion in our lives and work and completion in God's work  
are not the same thing.

The changes and endings which feel like loss to us  
can be part of the natural flow of life in an organization or ministry.  
We can trust that the work we do bears fruit  
far beyond what we can see and know.

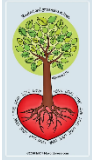


This week I discovered a podcast called Bibleworm –  
two scripture scholars, one Christian and one Jewish,  
taking a deep dive into each week’s narrative lectionary reading.  
Robert Williamson shared in this week’s podcast what he hears Paul  
saying:

*Look, the stuff that you’re doing right now? It matters.  
And you may not see it right now, but it will come to its full fruition.*

*Our work, Williamson continues, is not to complete all the work,  
but to complete the work that is ours to do, which is part of a much  
larger picture, ongoing before us and ongoing after us. This is an  
encouragement that we are doing the work that is ours to do and that’s  
all we need to be concerned with.*

During Covid, I began doing Yoga online  
with a teacher I’d studied with in seminary.  
In the meditation ending each class, Rachel would say,  
*Practice letting go the work that is not yours to do  
So that you can be freed to do the work that is yours to do*  
And each time I heard it I would think, Yes, please.  
It’s so easy for us – as individuals and as a faith community –  
to get caught up in all the needs, all the possibilities,  
and try to do everything at once.  
But the truth is, we cannot be all things to all people.  
Part of our life in Christ is discerning, individually and together,  
the work for which we have gifts and resources and capacity,  
and to do that work.  
That is the work that is ours to do – we might say our vocation,  
or the work God calls us to.



And for that work of discernment, Paul offers a prayer.  
A beautiful prayer which we prayed together as our prayer of the day  
at the beginning of the service.

*This is my prayer, Paul writes,  
That your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight  
to help you determine what really matters*

Determining what really matters, what to focus on with our energy and time,  
is discernment.

And discernment, Paul says, begins in love.

It is love that leads to insight and knowledge about the Christian life.

It is love that determines what is best.

The work we do in our faith is rooted and grounded in love.

So when we see and hear all the messages of what it looks like to be Christian,  
the way to discern what is true to the gospel is to look for love.

Whatever teaches exclusion or hate is not of the gospel.

Christian nationalism and white supremacy? Not the gospel.

Tradwives and control over women's lives and bodies? Not the gospel.

Laws that limit transgender people's access to health care, sports,  
and even public restrooms? Not the gospel.

Efforts to send home all the immigrants who don't look like us,  
even if they have never set foot in the countries we deport them to  
even if they and their families risked their lives to work with American  
military in Afganistan? Not, not, not consistent with the gospel.



God's love, taught by Paul and embraced by the earliest followers of  
Christ in Philippi, was a gospel of love –

far reaching, boundary crossing love.

The mission shared by the saints in Philippi

and the saints of the church in all the centuries since

is God's own mission to love, save and bless the whole world.

It begins in love, knowing we are blessed by God,  
and the desire to share God's love and blessing with the world.

That is partnership in the gospel.

That is the good work God continues to complete,  
begun centuries ago in Bethlehem and carried along by all of us,  
the saints of God in every time and place.

So, my friends, I do indeed thank my God every time I remember you,  
and every time I remember the work of love seek to do together in this place.  
May Pauls' words give us courage and hope for today.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.