

# Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



## **Philippians 1:1-2, 3-11** **“Among Friends”**

October 16, 2016  
(22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday After Pentecost)

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**“Following Christ From City Center!”**

**PHILIPPIANS 1:1-2,3-11 "AMONG FRIENDS"**

			1:13, 4:22, From Rome? (Acts 28:16-30) Debated
		<b>I. 1:1-2 A to B, GREETING.</b>	Prison: Also Ephesians (4:1, 3:1), Colossians (1:24, 4:10), Philemon (1:7, 13)
1	A	Paul and Timothy, servants (slaves) of Christ Jesus,	Apostle + Colleague + People + Local Leaders, Visits To Paul, 4:1-10, 2:19-30 (superscriptio), 2:19-23 <i>Timothy</i> (2 Cor., Col., Philemon, Acts 16:1-3, 19:22, 20:3-4) Rom. 1:1 (Slave/Servant Of Yahweh), <i>Christ</i> (61x in letter!), Epithet: <i>Servant</i> (2:7)
	B	To <i>all</i> the saints ( <i>hagioi</i> ) in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops (overseers) and deacons (helpers):	Elaborates Greco-Roman Epistle Form, <i>All</i> (8x vv.1-11) (adscriptio) Ps. 34:9, Lev. 19:2, Ex. 19:6, Dan. 7:18 Red=Themes Treated Later, Saints Not = Moral Achievements 2 Layers, Plural Leaders, Acts 20:28, Church Servants/Offices, Rom. 16:1-2 (Phoebe) References To Local Church Leaders, 1 Timothy, Titus
2	G	Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.	(salutatio) 4:7, Gift + Result: God's Good Will Brings Shalom/Wholeness //1 Cor. 12:4-6, Jesus Coordinated With The Father, Lord Not Caesar vv.3-11 = <i>captitio benevolentiae</i> / exordium (secure good will)

		<b>II. 1:3-11 THANKSGIVING, PRAYER, PREVIEW OF THEMES.</b>	Topics: Gratitude, Affection, Joy, Thanks, Partnership, Growth, Day Of Christ, Perfection, Prison
		<b>A. vv.3-6 Thanks For Three Items, Prayer, Completion Of God's Good Work.</b>	<i>Every/All</i> (7x) Paul Is Thankful, Loves Them, Prays For Them = Solidarity/Good Will
3		I thank my <b>God</b>	Begin With Thanks (v.3), End In Praise (v.11)
	1)	in <i>all</i> my remembrance of you (your remembrance of me?),	Gift Reference 4:10-20, Devotion, <i>my God</i> v.4//3 Jn. 4
4	2)	<i>always</i> in every <b>prayer</b> of mine for you <i>all</i> making my prayer with joy,	<i>Joy</i> (1:4,18; 2:2, 17-18, 28, 29; 3:1, 4:1,4,10)
5		thankful for your partnership/participation ( <i>koinonia</i> ) in the gospel from the first day until now.	Mission Gift, 4:15, 16, 17 (Gifts), 2 Cor. 8:7 Acts 16:6-40, Spiritual Father; Faithful Partners, Gifts 4:10 Christ Creates Partnerships (\$/Feelings) In Grace
6	3)	And I am sure (convinced) that he who began a good work in you will bring it to <b>completion</b> at <b>the day of Jesus Christ</b> .	Good Start + Progress+ Perseverance = Process First Day/Now/Complete At Return //2:13, 3:20, Is. 41:1-5 Completion = Same Root As Filled (v.11)
		<b>B. v.7 It Is Right, Expression Of Affection: Feel.</b>	
7		Just as it is right for me to feel (think) thus about you <i>all</i> , because I hold you in my heart, for you are <i>all</i> partakers ( <i>sunkoinonos</i> ) with me of grace, both in my imprisonment (chains) and in the "defense" and "confirmation" of the gospel;	Paul's Joy/Emotions Reveal His Heart/Priorities 1/10 Uses Of Think/Mindset ( <i>phroneo</i> ) Topos Of Friendship, Deep Bond: Center Of Life Grace = God's Strength To Our Need, 2 Cor. 12:9 Motif Of Suffering Introduced, Not Outwardly Productive 1:17, Legal Defense And Proof, Witness Partnership In Gospel At Center Of Relationship
		<b>B' v.8 God As Witness (Oath), Expression Of Affection: Yearn/Longing.</b>	
8		<i>for</i> (the) God is my "witness," how I yearn for you <i>all</i> with the affection of Christ Jesus.	Forensics, "Technical Legal Terms" 4:1, Puts Himself Under Solemn Oath, No Show <i>Splangchna</i> (Inner Parts), Amazing Heart His Pulse Beats With The Pulse Of Christ For Them!
		<b>A' vv.9-11 Prayer For Three Items, Future Completion Of God's Work In Love.</b>	
9		And it is my <b>prayer</b>	1:4 Reference, Content Of Paul's Prayer Is Important: Full Sanctification In View //Col. 1:1-9, <i>deesis</i> (v.4), <i>proseuchomai</i> (v.9): 2 Words For Prayer
	1)	that your love may abound more and more,	Without Love First, Knowledge And All Else Is Distorted, Love Not Blind 4:12, 18, Love + Knowledge + Discernment + Judgment = Preparation Before Correction/Instruction Comes Prayer
10	2)	with knowledge and <i>all</i> discernment (depth of insight), so that you may approve what is excellent (best),	More Than Intellect, Insight/Illumined, Moral Wisdom 4:8, Problems Of 2:2, 14; 4:1ff., Rom. 12:12, Love Linked To Ethics And Avoid False Teaching, 3:1-4:1
	3)	and may be pure and blameless for <b>the day of Christ</b> ,	3:21, <i>Pure</i> (lit. tested by sunlight) //4:4-9, 1 Thess. 5:23
11		<b>filled</b> with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of <b>God</b> .	Crop = Mature Moral Fruits, Gal. 5:22 Formal Liturgical Acclamation, Ultimate Goal Of All Life Inclusion: <i>God-prayer-completion-day of Christ</i> (vv.3-6)// <i>prayer-day of Christ-filled-God</i> (vv.10b-11)

## AMONG FRIENDS

“...he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion....”

Paul’s care and confidence are grounded in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ.

### PHILIPPIANS 1 : 6

**E**mail and junk mail, cell phones and texting. Not much to say, but boy can we say it a hurry! And with rapid communication comes the expectation of immediate response. Information overload and impatience go together, as well as a new mental health concern around *technology withdrawal*, which is the heightened anxiety that comes when heavy users are disconnected from their screens. It’s even been given a new diagnostic name, *nomophobia*– short for *no mobile phone phobia*, but the experts say it’s more an anxiety issue than a true phobia in the technical sense. There’s even a twenty question checklist to rate your dependency!<sup>1</sup> Some are calling for a new kind of Sabbath: a day a week unhooked from all electronic communication- including TV and radio– to let mind and soul recover from the glut of trivia.<sup>2</sup> Noise is not listening, and spewing out data is not communication. It’s the rest between the notes that makes the music beautiful. Some wonder: Is the art of conversation in danger?

I remember once making a home visit on a widow in her 90's. During World War II she and her husband were apart for three years. Every day she wrote a letter, and when one of his arrived– as they did irregularly– she read it

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<sup>1</sup> See Carolyn Gregoire, “This Scientific Test Will Tell You How Addicted You Are To Your Smartphone,” [www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/18/nomophobia-smartphone-sep\\_n\\_7266468](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/18/nomophobia-smartphone-sep_n_7266468).

<sup>2</sup> Mark Earley, “Recovering Sabbath Rest,” [www.christianpost.com](http://www.christianpost.com), 3/18/08. Also Jane Brody, “Screen Addiction Is Taking a Toll on Children,” 7/6/15, [nytimes.com/2015/07/06/screen-addiction-is-taking-a-toll-on-children/?\\_r=0](http://nytimes.com/2015/07/06/screen-addiction-is-taking-a-toll-on-children/?_r=0).

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**Philippians 1:1-2, 3-11..... 4**

over and over and bathed it in prayer for his return. When asked if she saved the letters, she said with a lowered head and girlish blush that made me smile, “Not all of them, *just the good ones!*” Three years of him fearing a stray bullet, her dreading a black car pulling up to her parents’ home. Imagine the heart throb of their first hug and the sweetness of the first kiss. Though separated by miles of uncertainty, the marriage was sustained on pen and paper, with longing prayer and eager expectation. A personal letter has— in our day— become a great gift, the sign of a desire to communicate deeply. Not quick and efficient but slow and thoughtful. Not an information dump but the celebration of a relationship.

Some scholars estimate Paul spent as much as a quarter of his time in various jails as a danger to public order.<sup>3</sup> I preach, and people give me a grade; Paul preached, and riots broke out! His message of *Jesus as Lord* meant Caesar was not, and that was dangerous; that he preached as alive a Jesus who’d been strung up for sedition against Rome only made it worse.<sup>4</sup> At least four of his letters- Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon— are written from prison. Arguments about where Paul was when he dictated Philippians will probably never be solved, but Ephesus is my best guess.<sup>5</sup>

We know the church sent a gift to Paul and that the envoy— one Epaphroditus— became seriously ill after his arrival.<sup>6</sup> He came with news from Philippi and a gift for Paul’s upkeep; he returned with a letter to be read in the house churches of his city. And since he was there when it was written, he could supply answers to what Paul meant if there were questions. With the letter went a live interpreter.<sup>7</sup> That Paul acknowledges the possibility of

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<sup>3</sup> John McRay, "Paul and His Times," *Christian History*, No. 47.

<sup>4</sup> See Scot McKnight, Joseph Modica, *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire In New Testament Studies* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Epistles* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2004), 84.

<sup>6</sup> 2:25-29.

<sup>7</sup> 2:19-24.

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**Philippians 1:1-2, 3-11..... 5**

martyrdom early in the letter signals how serious things had become.<sup>8</sup> So the question is: If you had only one letter left, what would you write? The wisdom and passion wrung out of Paul's heart and deposited on papyrus is a treasure; if written to us it would have been *Paul's Letter to the Greenwoodians*.

A man was marooned for years alone on a desert island in the Pacific. One day a ship came into view; he lit a fire and with the smoke got the ship's attention. A dingy landed, and the captain stepped out. After introductions he asked the castaway, "Why three huts?"

"That first is my house."

"And the next one?"

"I built that for my church."

"And the third?"

"Oh," he answered solemnly, "that's the church I used to go to."<sup>9</sup>

No church hopping in Philippi. Only one option, and it consisted of all the Jesus followers who met in a cluster of house churches, Lydia's home being the first.<sup>10</sup> It would be nearly three centuries before the church had its own property; we were a *living room religion* long before we became a *temple religion*. We were God's invisible missionary people long before we owned dedicated property.<sup>11</sup> And when Epaphroditus came back with a letter from Paul, it was a big deal. They knew the author, and when Paul's words were read they heard the tone and rhythms of his voice again.<sup>12</sup> He was in jail for the faith they shared in common, and that gave his words weight.

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<sup>8</sup> 1:19-21.

<sup>9</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Philippians 1:1-11.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 16:15.

<sup>11</sup> For a positive reassessment of the transition, see Peter J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2010), especially Chapter 5, "Liberator Eccelsiae," 97-125.

<sup>12</sup> See Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995).

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TURNING TO THE TEXT

1) vv.1-2 Opening Formalities.

It's interesting how Paul introduces himself and his co-author. He and Timothy are *slaves of Jesus Christ*, which is a paradox of the lowest and the highest. Someone owned them both, yet he is the Lord of freedom. They are committed to obedience, yet the one they obey is the highest authority in the universe and using them in a partnership to change the world. Do you think of yourself as a Christian free agent, or as *a slave of Jesus Christ*? It makes all the difference.

Paul was an encourager of younger leaders, and to be in his company was to learn from a master. It takes a pastor to create a pastor, a missionary to create a missionary, a plumber to create a plumber. If you met the three or four most formative men and women in my life, you'd see why I do about ninety percent of what I do. I got it from them, just like Timothy from Paul. We are meant to pour our lives into other people so the faith is passed across the generations. We are *slaves of Jesus Christ*, and unless you see both the lowliness and the authority of that phrase, you don't understand Paul.

I remember a second grade science experiment from Mrs. Laney's class in 1960. We were told to draw a six inch circle in the middle of a piece of construction paper with a compass. We then sprinkled a teaspoon of iron filings in the circle. When you held a magnet under the paper, all the filings stood at attention; when you moved the magnet, the filings moved. The invisible force was electro-magnetism, and when like poles were pushed together, they pushed back with real power. I was amazed at the invisible strength.

So who are Christians? We are the people who've been drawn into the force field of Jesus' invisible power. We live within the circle of his influence, and that is what Paul was referring to when he named his hearers as "...all the saints who are *in Christ Jesus* at Philippi," with *saint* not being the equivalent of the spiritually elite but of *all* who've been *set apart* to belong to Christ. It's not primarily a moral category but a set-apart identity into which we grow.

Since the saints in Philippi had been under the influence of Jesus for a few

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**Philippians 1:1-2, 3-11..... 7**

years now, some were taking on roles within the community as servant leaders, as those who watched over the community- the bishops or pastors, and those who carried out practical duties of care and service- the deacons or helpers. All did not have the same roles and duties, but all- even the worst behaved- were *saints* set apart for God.

It was to the church as a whole that Paul announced the blessing in verse 2, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” *Grace* is a relational word for God’s kindness, and *peace* is the result of receiving such. The avenues of God’s outreach are many, but the single purpose is to heal our relationship with God and grow us up in the faith.<sup>13</sup> Paul had a high view of the church, and full as it may be of problems, it’s still the forward base of God’s work in a broken world. David Goetz gets it right. Listen:

“For all of its foibles- lousy preaching, political infighting, stagnation... there can be no genuine spiritual progress without a long-term attachment to a *pokey local church*.... Disillusionment is not a reason to leave but a reason to stay and see what God will create in one's life and in the *pokey local church*.... Thinking I know my true spiritual needs is ‘so American.’ Staying put as a life practice allows God's grace to work on the unsanded surfaces of my inner life. Seventeenth-century French Catholic mystic Francois Fenelon was right when he wrote, ‘Slowly you will learn that all the troubles in your life- your job, your health, your inward failings- are really cures to the poison of your old nature.’”<sup>14</sup>

In Philippi, at Main Street, in your marriage or singleness, in your job or lack thereof, with your family or lack thereof, with your gifts and limits: it is under the particular constraint of local conditions that the faith is lived out. Your life as it now stands is the raw material on which Jesus leaves his mark, “This one belongs to me.”

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<sup>13</sup> William Abraham, et. al., *Canonical Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> *Christianity Today* (July 2003), 33.

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**Philippians 1:1-2, 3-11..... 8**

There are four partially finished sculptures Michelangelo intended to use on the tomb of Pope Julius.<sup>15</sup> Midway through the project he decided against it. There is a hand protruding here, a torso of a man there, a leg, part of a head, but none were finished. Nearly everyone who sees the unfinished works senses the struggle in the figures, as though crying out to break free from the prison of the great marble blocks to become what they were intended to be. Michelangelo called them *The Captives*. Theodore Roder wrote:

"When I looked at those partial figures, they stirred up in me a deep longing to be completed- an ache to be set free from that which distorts and disguises, imprisons and inhibits my humanness, my wholeness. But as with those statues, I cannot liberate myself. For that I need the hand of another."<sup>16</sup>

What we need to set us free is the hand of Jesus Christ the sculptor as delivered through the hands of pastors, of local church leaders, and of the whole community of saints who belong to him. It is right here that we will be changed or not at all. It is in the *pokey local church* that we receive the rich treasures of grace and grow in the knowledge of the God who defines himself in Jesus.

**2) vv.3-11 Thanksgiving And Prayer.**

**A. vv.3-6 Good Choices When Times Are Tough.**

Paul was in chains, not knowing whether he'd live or die. In 2003 I preached in an Uzbek church in Kazakhstan led by a young man who'd been imprisoned for his faith in his home country. Guards beat the soles of his feet with rubber hoses till bones broke. To watch him limp hurt my heart. In such situations humility is not something you have to work at; you feel very small, and I did.

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<sup>15</sup> May be viewed at "Michaelangelo's Prisoners or Slaves," [www.academia.org/explore-museum/artworks/michelangelos-prisoners-slaves](http://www.academia.org/explore-museum/artworks/michelangelos-prisoners-slaves).

<sup>16</sup> John H. Stevens, "His Liberating Touch," *Discipleship Journal* (July/August 1984).

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**Philippians 1:1-2, 3-11..... 9**

In the midst of suffering we have a choice, as did Paul. Life can take a lot of things away from you; one thing it cannot take away is your choice of how to *respond*. In the space of the freedom that existed between what was happening to him and the options, Paul chose to do four things that we can do:

- 1) He chose to remember his friends, verse 3: “I thank God is all my remembrance of you....” He was sustained in community.
- 2) He chose to pray for others, verse 4: “always in every prayer of mine for you all....” He was strengthened as he prayed for others.
- 3) He chose joy, verse 4: “making my prayer with joy.” Happiness is largely circumstantial, but joy in Jesus Christ is a decision.
- 4) He chose to look beyond present pain to the glory that was ahead for him and his hearers, verse 6: “And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion a the day of Jesus Christ.” He embraced a future better than any difficult present.

Paul didn’t play the victim. He had for so long practiced the virtues of faith, hope, and love that when in jail they sustained him. And that is how the spiritual disciplines work.<sup>17</sup> We practice prayer and giving and worship and study and silence and repentance and fasting and service. In the practice of them God grants us grace so we are slowly and inwardly changed. Then, in hard times, we find that we are sustained by the disciplines because in the process we’ve already become different people. It’s when you don’t feel thankful that you most need to give thanks, when you are most self-absorbed that you most need to pray for others, when you are most down that joy becomes a choice, and when the future looks bleakest that you need to remind yourself where we are headed. Choosing how to respond to circumstances is the definition of self-

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<sup>17</sup> For a classic introduction, see Richard Foster, *Celebration Of Discipline* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1996); also Dallas Willard, *The Spirit Of The Disciplines* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1999).

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control, and that is also a fruit of the Holy Spirit.<sup>18</sup>

Since the floor of the Princeton gym was being resurfaced, basketball great— and later Senator— Bill Bradley put in several practices at Lawrenceville High. The first afternoon he began shooting 14-foot jump shots from the right side. Six in a row hit the back of the rim and bounced out. Bradley stopped and seemed to be making an adjustment. He then went up for another jump shot from the same spot and hit it cleanly. Four more went in without a miss; he then paused and said, "That basket is an inch and a half low."

Some weeks later, I (John McPhee) went back to Lawrenceville with a steel tape, borrowed a ladder, and measured the height of the basket. It was nine feet, ten and seven-eighths inches off the floor, one and one eighth inches low.<sup>19</sup>

How did Bradley do that? Because of the discipline of thousands of such shots at a true ten foot basket. He'd mastered his craft, and that is what Paul demonstrates. He's been so mastered by Jesus Christ that he's now able to choose responses which seem almost supernatural to us. Nothing could separate him from the treasures he shared with his spiritual children in Philippi. They had been partakers with him in the gospel from the first day until now, and the food he was eating that day had likely been purchased with their gift. And in the end, in the very end, they would enjoy each other's company for ever. As we say in the creed, "I believe in the communion of saints."

With Paul there is this constant oscillation between the vertical- his relationship with God, and the horizontal- his relationship with people for whom he has spiritual responsibility. Not God alone as a mystic or people alone as a social worker, but God and people and then people and God. The Roman authorities might limit his movement, but they could not constrict his thanks, limit his joy, or block his prayers. They locked him down in chains, and the letter he dictated under their noses is still having an impact. We're reading it this morning! How's that for long term influence? It's the difference between

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<sup>18</sup> Galatians 5:22-23.

<sup>19</sup> John McPhee, *A Sense of Where You Are* (New York, N.Y.: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1965).

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**Philippians 1:1-2, 3-11..... 11**

being *pro-active* (choosing your responses) and being *re-active* (letting circumstances dictate your responses). Practicing spiritual disciplines keeps us open to the changes God wants to make in us so that when we need to make extraordinary responses, the skill and depth are there. Paul did not plan to be imprisoned, but when placed there it was just another place to shine. Go see the movie *Sully* with Tom Hanks. As a trainer of pilots, Sullenberger had rehearsed such a scenario so many times that when the geese took out both engines shortly after takeoff, the rest was basically three tense minutes of muscle memory. He didn't have to find the solution; he was the solution. It was written on the hard disk of his habits through practice and imagination.

**B//B' vv.7-8 Feeling Paul's Heartbeat.**

One of the most amazing things about the Apostle Paul was his spiritual maturity and human wholeness. His mind was sharp, his emotions deep. We can feel the heartbeat of Paul and the bond of affection he has with the church at Philippi in verse 7: "Just as it is right for me to *feel* thus about you all, *because I hold you in my heart....*" They were dear to him, and he did not mind saying so publicly, which is a stretch for most men, including me!

Eight years ago I brought Lori a gift back from a mission trip to Serbia: a deep red Swarovski crystal heart. Her jewelry box is the only way I can remember all the places I've been! I planned my chivalric speech ahead of time, and when on bended knee I gave her the little box, I said, "Fair lady, I now leave my heart with you when I depart next on some grand adventure." Her look was, "And what planet did you just arrive from?" The first day she wore it to school, one of her students said, "Mrs. Thrailkill, I saw one just like that at Wal-Mart."

But this kind of emotional bond and open expression is one of the signs that God's grace is at work in a community. Love is demonstrated in actions and spoken in words that match the deeds. I love it when- after coming here to Main Street, people say, "I felt the love and wanted to come back." In bad times- when he was literally *in chains*, and in good times- when he was

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**Philippians 1:1-2, 3-11..... 12**

presenting and defending the message about Jesus like a lawyer before a jury,<sup>20</sup> Paul knew he and his friends in Philippi were joined by something that did not originate with them but passed through the both, “for you are all partakers with me of *grace*,” the loving energy that comes from God, the force field of the personality of the risen Jesus. So important was this emotional reasoning that Paul invoked a mild oath to secure his credibility, “For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the *affection* (literally *the innards*) of Jesus Christ.”

Deep in his belly Paul felt something of the Lord’s compassion for these people who’d taken the risk of becoming Christ-followers in an immoral world full of many gods and goddesses. This I believe, is perhaps the ultimate reward for following Jesus, that we begin to see people through his eyes and share in the hopes he has for them, including the deepest emotions of joy and sorrow. Paul the courageous apostle and towering intellect was also Paul the lover of God’s people. People are looking for love, and if they find it here, it will eventually lead them to Jesus and to being channels of his love to others, which is the only thing that’s going to tip this world in the right direction.

**A’) vv.9-11 Paul’s Prayer.**

Paul had plenty of time in jail for prayer, for being with the Lord, for listening and day dreaming with the Holy Spirit. What would you do with that much confined free time? He could not work at his trade as a leather worker, travel, or preach. His passion had to be routed into other channels: one was prayer, the other was letter writing, and Philippians is evidence of both. No one could stop him from communing with the God who called him. Kirsten Strand has written:

“I have learned that ignoring a calling can lead to depression, anger, frustration, and a deep dissatisfaction with life. And I have learned that following a calling can also lead to moments of depression, anger, frustration, and loneliness. Yet, underneath those feelings

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<sup>20</sup> The terms *defense*, *confirmation*, and *witness* in vv. 7-8 are technical legal vocabulary. I think they refer to Paul’s regular preaching and apologetics rather than to his upcoming court trial.

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**Philippians 1:1-2, 3-11..... 13**

will be a profound sense of peace and satisfaction.”<sup>21</sup>

That was Paul; his calling led to imprisonment, and in verses 9 through 11 he shares with his friends the content of his prayers for them. He lets them listen in on his conversations with the Almighty. “And this is my prayer,” he begins, “that your love may abound more and more....” Love for God, love for people, love for the intricacies of creation, an open-hearted and vulnerable embrace of life. To grow in this love is the meaning of knowing Jesus Christ among his people. And when you stop growing in the multiple dimensions of love, something essential to your humanity begins to wither.

*The Sound of Music* is about a young candidate for the convent— Julie Andrews as Maria. She has trouble fitting into convent life and is sent to be a governess for the Von Trapp children. There she hopes to find out whether she’s meant to be a nun or whether God has something else. Confused about her feelings for the debonair Captain Von Trapp, Maria suddenly flees back to the convent. She meets with the Mother Superior, who asks why she was sent back. Maria admits she left because she was afraid and confused and needed the sanctuary of the abbey.

She is then firmly instructed, "An abbey is not to be used as an escape. What is it you can't face?"

Maria admits she may be in love with the Captain but isn't sure. "That's what's been torturing me. I was there on God's errand. To ask for his love would have been wrong. I couldn't stay. I just couldn't." She faces a crucifix, "I'm ready at this moment to take my vows. Please help me."

"Maria," she says, "the love of a man and a woman is holy, too. You have a great capacity to love. *What you must find out is how God wants you to spend your love.*" She then sings "Climb every mountain, ford every stream, follow every rainbow, till you find your dream." It's a magic moment, and if you can watch that scene without being stirred to some great, lost dream in your own life, then you are- I fear, already dead but unburied.

Paul’s prayer is that their love increase and be lavishly spent wherever the

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<sup>21</sup> "Following a Tough Call," GiftedforLeadership.com (3-31-07).

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**Philippians 1:1-2, 3-11..... 14**

saints are posted. Start with love, says Paul; ask God to dig you out and increase your capacity, because that is what the world needs most, people who see through the wisdom of Jesus' cross-shaped love. Pray for eyes to see.

There's a fancy word you need to know, and the word is *epistemology*. It's the sub-discipline of philosophy that deals with the question of how we know what we know. For the follower of Jesus, the assumption is that we can have true knowledge only of what we love, because as John says in his first epistle, "God is love."<sup>22</sup> Love sees into the depths of things, which is why it's the path to the true knowledge and good choices. As love grows, says Paul, it expands its scope "with knowledge and all discernment so that you may approve—among the many options—what is most excellent." Choices that please God can be traced back through insight and knowledge back to the love we learn in prayer and among God's people. Not just doing things: activism, but doing the right things: knowledge, for the right reason: love, because we know who God is: prayer. Love is not blind; love is not satisfied till it knows what it needs to know in order to do what it needs to do, which is pursue God's outcome in every situation. The path to right action passes through the halls of learning and begins with prayer for love to increase.

It interests me where Paul ends his prayer report, not with the immediate transformation of the world but with believers being changed into the kind of people who can enter the new creation now and later. He prays in verse 10 that they become "pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with all the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God." As pure as a ruby red crystal heart held up in the sunlight, as free from stumbling blocks as a well-graded path. People who are fully alive to God and to all God made good. That is the purpose of what God is doing through the church: is to offer people a way back to the One who made them.

It was because of Paul's compelling vision that he was able to endure hardship with joy and fill prison with imaginative prayer. He saw love working everywhere around him to heal the wounds of creation. C.S. Lewis wrote:

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<sup>22</sup> 4:7.

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**Philippians 1:1-2, 3-11..... 15**

“The command ‘be ye perfect’ is not idealistic gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He is going to make us into creatures that can obey that command.”<sup>23</sup>

So when a budding United Methodist pastor is asked at Annual Conference, “Do you expect to be made *perfect in love in this life?*” and answers, “Yes,” it’s not a statement of spiritual pride or heroism but of trust in the power of Jesus to utterly transform us, not just then but even now.<sup>24</sup>

**CONCLUSION**

A little girl in England, Josie Caven, was born profoundly deaf, isolated in silence. All that changed after receiving a cochlear implant during the Christmas season she was two. After waking, she heard clearly for the first time, and the song was *Jingle Bells* coming from the radio.

Was Josie's hearing restored? Yes- completely. Was she hearing well immediately? Not exactly. Her mother said, "She’s having to learn what each new sound is and what it means. She asks, “Was that a door closing?” and has realized for the first time that the light in her room hums when switched on. She knows what her name sounds like now, because before she could not hear the soft *S* sound in the middle of the word.” Josie's hearing was restored, but that restoration introduced her to the daily adventure of learning to distinguish each new sound in the world of the hearing.<sup>25</sup>

The sounds of the new world are already operative in our midst. Paul heard them. Can you hear them?

Will you love your Lord and his people by making a faithful and generous pledge on Stewardship Sunday? Will you love your pokey local church?

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<sup>23</sup> "Reflections," *Christianity Today* (8-21-00).

<sup>24</sup> *The Book of Discipline* 2004, 214.

<sup>25</sup> PreachingToday.com search under Philippians 1:1-11.

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