

WPC
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A Joyful Letter
Acts 16:11-15; Philippians 1:1-11

There's a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary who lives at 175 Alexander Street. Occasionally, however, she receives mail intended for someone at 175 Andrews Street. She has never met the resident at 175 Andrews, but she knows a number of things about her. She knows her name, the college she attended (from alumni magazines), the general area of her work (from professional journals), and perhaps even her political leanings (from the solicitations of various organizations). She also suspects her of being thoughtful, since she once left a stack of the professor's misdirected mail at her back door. All of this she surmises without ever having met the resident of 175 Andrews.

This professor's deduction has a counterpart in our reading of early Christian letters. This morning we begin a brand new sermon series on the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians. It's important to remember when we read Philippians, we're actually reading someone else's mail. Clues in the letter help us identify the author, its intended audience, and something of the relationship between them. While there's much we don't know about the

ones who first received this letter, we are able to deduce some things, and in this letter we're also allowed to overhear Paul's words of encouragement to this church which he dearly loved.

This letter was written by Paul while he was in a Roman prison, yet as we'll see his attitude throughout the book is one of great joy. We believe this was the last letter that Paul wrote to a church (last letter to a person was 2 Timothy). Philippi was a Roman colony city located on one of the main roads between East and West in the Roman Empire. As we've heard from our first reading from the book of Acts, the Christian community in Philippi was the first church Paul established in Europe. Paul had a close relationship with this church, and when the Philippians discovered that Paul was in jail, they sent a young man named Epaphroditus to help him and bring him gifts.

Why did Paul write this letter? The immediate occasion of Paul's writing was the return to Philippi of Epaphroditus, who had become seriously ill while staying with Paul. He then took this opportunity to thank the Philippians for their gifts and then to address some specific difficulties the church was going through. He also wrote to encourage the Philippians in the face of opposition, for a main theme of this letter is persistence in faith in spite of harsh circumstances and even the threat of death.

Paul starts all of his letters in the same way: first, he identifies himself and who he's writing to, and then he includes a prayer at the beginning. In his letter to the Philippians, there are three things he prays for:

First, he prays they will remember that the God who began a good work among them will bring it to completion – v. 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.” Eugene Peterson paraphrases this verse, “There has never been the slightest doubt in my mind that the God who started this great work in you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day Christ Jesus appears.”

That's important for us to hear today as well. God is at work in us here at Wallingford and the good work that he's started in us is just the beginning, with far more to come. We're moving towards fulfillment.

I've been reading Anna St. Martin's summaries from the Appreciative Inquiry classes she's led this fall, and I know that some of you are feeling some uncertainty and maybe even anxiety about the transition our church has been going through lately. There have been a lot of changes in the past months. But there are a lot of important constants, too. The same amazing, caring, authentic church family; the same incredible, talented music team led by Ray Allen; the same wonderful leadership of our children and youth by

Gina, Ester, and Gayle; and the same obsessively compulsive, neat-freak Pastor Ken, with all of my quirks, and with all of my deep love for this congregation.

But most importantly, the single constant that dwarfs any other is that the God who started with us on our journey of faith is the same God who continues to accompany us today. If God is with us, then what have we to fear? If God is with us, nothing is impossible.

Secondly, Paul prays that the Philippians' love "may overflow more and more ... so that in the day of Christ they may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God." This is a prayer for the Philippians to have a strong Christian character; they are to live in such a way that God's love will flow through their lives and produce righteous fruit.

Paul's third prayer is very interesting: he prays that they will think clearly. In v. 9 Paul writes, "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best." Paul uses words which mean to know deeply and be perceptive. He also uses a word which Earl Palmer notes is the 1st Century equivalent of having "common sense." Paul is telling them to think

clearly, with intelligence and common sense, so that we can act with good judgment in the world in which we live.

We are to learn broadly and be well-informed. We are also to go deeper in our knowledge. That's why it's so important that every Christian be involved in Bible study and small groups – we not only need to know what God's Word says, but also what it means for our lives. And finally, we're to exercise common sense.

When I was a seminary student back in 1990, I had an opportunity to be an intern at the Young Nak Presbyterian Church in Seoul, Korea. At the time, Young Nak was the largest Presbyterian church in the world, with about 50,000 members. I was glad that two years ago I was able to bring my family to worship there while we were on sabbatical.

The man who started this church, Pastor Han Kyung Chik, was the first Korean to attend Princeton Theological Seminary. I had the privilege of meeting him during my internship year. When I returned from my internship, I heard a story about Pastor Han that I had not heard before.

At every Princeton commencement, the 50 year graduates are honored, and one member from that class is always interviewed. Pastor Han was the one to be interviewed from his class, and at one point during the interview, Dr. Samuel Moffett asked him how they chose elders for a church

the size of Young Nak. Pastor Han responded, “We quiz prospective elders on four subjects: Bible, theology, church history, and common sense.” The crowd listening to the interview started clapping and cheering, because they all realized the church indeed needs all four of those things to function in this world.

Common sense is to not only know the theory, but to know it practically. So that we not only study theology, but we also put our faith into action. We not only read the Great Commission, but we actively support mission. We not only study Jesus’ commands to help the poor, but we raise money through the CROP Walk and our Alternative Gift Fair. Paul prays that the Philippians would have wide knowledge, deep knowledge, and common sense.

And Paul wants them to remember that the God who began the journey with them will continue it. Jesus Christ is the companion who goes with us on our journey.

Back in the summer of 1988, my home church in Berkeley sent me on a summer mission trip to Morocco. When my team came to the city of Fez, we visited the tanning pools, where they prepared leather hides to be made into clothing and other products. It was a large area in an old part of the city – a city within the city. Yesterday, my daughter and I visited a corn maze at

a pumpkin farm. Even though the maze only took up a field, we got turned around and found ourselves lost. Walking through that neighborhood was like walking through a gigantic maze, a maze on steroids – I didn't see one single street sign. The shops all started looking the same, and it was impossible for me not to get lost.

I remember thinking to myself that even if someone gave me a map, I could never find my way out of that maze. But I was never worried, because we had a guide who knew his way around and led us safely into, around, and out of that neighborhood.

Earl Palmer says that a guide who knows the way is better than a map that shows the way. Jesus Christ is the ultimate guide who knows the way, and the good news is that he goes with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.