

What is the purpose of the church? Why did God establish an institution bearing the name of his son? What is God's purpose for our church here on the corner of Hawes and Mills? To answer these questions I want to explore St. Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. In this letter he talks about everything from the relationships of the people with one another to their relationship with the Lord, from what the work of the church is to how we should do what we've been commanded to do. Over the next few weeks we're going to explore this letter and consider what it has to say concerning our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, ⁵in view of your participation in the Gospel from the first day until now. ⁶*For I am* confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. ⁷For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. ⁹And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; ¹¹having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which *comes* through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Paul wrote, **"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, ⁵in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶*For I am* confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. (vv.3-6).**

This is the only letter where Paul told the people that he thanked God for his remembrance of them. That's why it's often called Paul's love letter to the church. He didn't have anything to quarrel with them about, which was rare!

Usually, he was thanking God for his grace for the people, because they needed as much of it as they could get!

But here, Paul wrote about how the Philippians had a true place in his heart. He goes into this in more detail shortly. But here, let me point out how he prayed **“with joy in every prayer”**: He was saying that whenever he prayed for the church, he remembered all the people, and that those thoughts welled up inside of him, and he was filled with thanksgiving and a sense of joyfulness.

Last week at the church board meeting I got my feelings hurt and I yelled at a board member, and it made me and everyone else feel bad. And it didn't end after the meeting. I carried those feelings around for a couple of days afterwards.

As I reflect on Paul's relationship with the church, I see there was a better way to handle what happened, for our goal is not to win at someone else's expense nor to create division in the body. But the goal is joy; the goal is love; the goal is a partnership which does not look like anything in the world. Namely, that we respect and accept one another in a way which reflects our relationship with Jesus.

Paul wrote that his joy comes **“in view of your participation in the Gospel from the first day until now,”** which means that everything the people had, everything which is good, which is godly, is because of Jesus. The same is true for you and me. What has the world blessed us with that we can brag about before God? Nothing. For there is no possession, nor learning, position, or experience which we have attained through this world's means which is worthy to soil the throne room of God Almighty.

But what is happening here, in our hearts and in our minds, that which is fed by the Spirit of the Living God, that experience which is defined by the same love and knowledge which Paul rejoiced in, is what we use to define ourselves.

Paul wrote, **“For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus” (vv. 7-8).**

When Paul talked about the heart, he was thinking like a Greek, which means everything in here (in the heart), was about how he thought and what he intended to do with his thoughts. The heart, he believed, was the seat of his personality. So when he said **“I have you in my heart,”** he was saying that your identity as the people of God defines my ministry; you are a reflection of everything I want to believe about the profound work of God in his people. You’re the very embodiment of Christianity for me.

And then he wrote **“I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.”** In the Greek, **“affection”** means “guts” or “innards.” That was the place for love for the Greek, the gut. I think of being in love, and how the experience gives one butterflies in their tummy. That might be the closest we can get to discerning the origin of the idea.

Paul was saying, I have this sensation in my gut, I have this deep love, these tender feelings, these yearnings for you which Jesus had for you when he died on the Cross for your sins and when he rose from the grave to gift you with eternal life.

That’s how I feel about Faith Lutheran Church. I regret my outburst last week, for it did not reflect my love and affection for you. For **“you are all partakers of grace with me,”** as Paul said, a grace that overcomes weakness and fear, a grace that is bigger than personality and pride.

Paul wrote, **“And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment” (v.9).** Notice how he joined **“love”** and **“knowledge.”** It’s in the gut, the love, and it’s in the heart, the will. This isn’t the only place where Paul spoke like this. In 1st Corinthians he wrote that **“knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1st Corinthians 8:1).** Thus knowledge must be shaped by love. He also wrote that to have knowledge but to not have love leaves one empty (1st Corinthians 13:2). To the church in Ephesus, he wrote that love is wed to God’s purpose and will for us (Ephesians 1:4), that they are inseparable.

To the Philippians, Paul wrote that he prays for the people that their love may be filled with knowledge **“so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; ¹¹ having been filled**

with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (vv.10-11).

This knowledge, this will, this love and affection which God has poured down on you and me, is the thing that makes life in this world a life worth living. After my temper tantrum last week, I thought all kinds of wicked thoughts about how I don't need the frustration and headache, about how I just might take my metaphorical ball and go home.

But then we had the memorial service for Shirley two days later, and I was reminded of God's work, about how he moved in Shirley's heart to love a man who was unlovable, how he fired up in her spirit his Spirit and gave her hope, how he filled her heart with compassion and service for people who were hurting. Shirley suffered from heart disease and cancer for years, but that did not interfere with God's work in her heart and in her mind, and she used the gifts she had been given to love and serve others until the end.

So I am humbled. And I reflect on the love and affection Jesus has for even one such as I. And my mind and heart are transformed, and I find joy in my fellowship with God's people.

Paul told the Philippians they were filled with the **“fruit of righteousness.”** He was talking about the fruit which comes from knowing Jesus, the Fruit of the Spirit, the love, joy and peace, the patience, kindness and goodness, the faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (**Galatians 5:22-23**). This is the outward behavior which is a sign of God's work inside of a person.

Which reminds me of Jesus' own words. He said, **“Beware of the false prophets.... You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles.... So every good tree bears good fruit but the bad tree bears bad fruit” (Matthew 7:15-17).** Don't mix your fruit! That's what he was saying. But subdue that part of your old man which is at war against the Spirit of God who lives in you. Be transformed in your mind and in your heart, and love and serve one another.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this week let us give thanks for the Spirit of Christ who has blessed us in our hearts and in our guts with his presence that we might be filled with the “**fruit of righteousness**” in our daily walk with one another.

This week let us live in love with one another and with all people, giving witness to the love God has for us. Let’s do the work of God with God.

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.