

Love Overflowing

Philippians 1:3-11

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One thing we need to keep in mind when we read Philippians is that Paul truly loved this congregation. This epistle is Paul's love letter to the church in Philippi. Located in Macedonia, northern Greece today, Philippi was a trading center in the Roman Empire, situated along the Egnatian Way, a major road built by the Romans in the 3rd century BC, stretching nearly 700 miles from the Adriatic Sea to modern-day Istanbul. Philippi was named after King Philip, the father of Alexander the Great. We learn in Acts that Paul had a vision or dream in which a man said to him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9). He woke up the following day and set out for Macedonia, landing in Neapolis along the coast, Paul's first steps on European soil. And there he began to preach the gospel.

Paul made his way to Philippi, about seven miles from the coast, as Luke tells us in Acts: "On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira [in Asia Minor] named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. 'If you consider me a believer in the Lord,' she said, 'come and stay at my house.' And she persuaded us" (Acts 16:13-15). Thus, the church of Jesus Christ took root and flourished in Philippi.

If you travel to Philippi today, you can walk around the ruins of that great city. Out beyond the ruins, there's a beautiful, peaceful outdoor worship space along the calmly flowing Krenides River, near where Lydia and her household were baptized. It's still a "a place of prayer," it's still a place where new Christians are baptized today. This place, Philippi, so full of love and joy for Paul.

Paul often had a conflictual relationship with the churches he established or ministered to. Galatians, the Corinthian correspondence, and Romans, for example, each address crises, heresies, and schisms within the church. The church in those places was a mess. Not so Philippi. Paul writes in this letter—a letter that was read to the church gathered together for worship, as we are, Paul writes a liturgical letter. He writes with the ear in mind. "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now" (Phil. 1:30).

Paul has deep affection for all the saints in that church. It's there in the text. Did you hear them? Feel them? These words leap from the page: Thanksgiving. Grace. Joy. Love. Sharing. Have you in my heart. Affection. The entire letter, particularly these opening verses, is all about grace and gratitude. And you can see it better in the original Greek. The Greek word for "grace" is *charis*. The Greek for "thanksgiving" is *eucharistia*. The Eucharist, also known as Communion or

the Lord's Supper, for Paul is not so much a memorial meal as it is a meal of thanksgiving. The word charis, grace, is embedded in eucharistia thankfulness, in gratitude. Paul writes, in verses 3. Eucharisto tou theou. "I thank God." And charis, grace, is related to the Greek word for "joy," chara or charas. So you charis, eucharistia, and chara. Grace, thanksgiving, joy. All at work together in this text.

An experience of God's grace in Christ inevitably leads us toward thanksgiving, accompanied by feelings of joy, which then send us out into the world to live from that grace and thanksgiving and joy. Grace leads to gratitude; gratitude opens us up to grace, which leads us back to gratitude, buoyed by joy, deep joy. Grace and gratitude. Grace and gratitude. This is the rhythm of the Christian life. There's something of this energy, this life-giving, dance-like dynamic at work in Paul and his relationship with the saints in Philippi. Paul is sharing in God's grace, filled with gratitude and joy, and he's sharing this joy with the saints, who are also sharing in God's grace, filled with gratitude and joy. And they are sharing, together, participating, partnering in this grace at work in them, together. Freely flowing through the church, through the community, one to the other.

Listen to how Eugene Peterson translates these verses in his translation *The Message*, "Every time you cross my mind, I break out in exclamations of thanks to God. Each exclamation is a trigger to prayer. I find myself praying for you with a glad heart. I am so pleased that you have continued on in this with us, believing and proclaiming God's Message, from the day you heard it right up to the present" (Phil. 1:3-5). I love Peterson's fresh language here.

And because of this love, Paul has great faith in them for a future unfolding by grace before their eyes. He had enormous confidence in that church. Listen to how Peterson's translation captures the relational quality of Paul's letter: "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." And what is Paul's hope and prayer for the church in Philippi? "That your love may overflow more and more" (Phil. 1:9). Love overflowing, more and more. That we would get caught up in the flow.

Again, from Peterson: "So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover's life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God" (Phil. 1:9-11).

I love Peterson's phrasing here. "That your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well." Can you feel the love in Paul's words for the church? Can you feel the energy? The confidence? The hope—not optimism. Optimism is not a biblical word, not a biblical category, but hope is. Hope is grounded in the resurrection where the unexpected is experienced, when new life emerges from the confines of death, and a new horizon, a new future can be imagined for God's people. That's what hope is. God is real for Paul, for us, God is alive and real in the world, as Christ makes clear to us. God is loving us, moving us, shaping us,

holding and upholding, redeeming us, liberating us, and enabling all of us together to be agents of reconciliation and liberation for one another, and the world.

This is the ground of their hope—and ours. Confident of what God is doing in them and through them (in us and through us), confident of what God is doing for them (for us), and for the world (for this world). Confident of that “flourishing finish” that the Spirit is moving all things toward.

What a dynamic image for the church. What a beautiful vision for our life together. As we make our way through Philippians on Thursday mornings, I’ve invited the group to pay close attention to the images that Paul uses in this letter and to be conscious of other images that surface within us as we read and hear this text. I’ve also invited the group to sketch or draw these images during class or afterward, to pay attention to the images. My heart this week has been drawn to this image: Love overflowing, more and more. A community flourishing. Learning to love much and love well. Serving one another in love. These are powerful, life-giving images for the church, images that shape and inform how we live together, images embodied in the way we love one another here and together in worship, and gather at the table, or engage in mission, in fellowship, which is more than cookies and coffee in the hall (as good as they are). Fellowship so rich that we are sharing together in the very life, the rich life of Christ, alive within us now, the life of Christ present between each of us.

Isn’t this a marvelous image and vision for the church? Love overflowing, more and more.

It’s easy to get discouraged about the state of the church these days in rapid decline, losing its voice in society, losing the trust of many, pastors burning out and retiring early, congregations low on resources, congregations plagued by division and schism. On this Sunday, when we gather for our Annual Meeting and reflect upon the ministry of this congregation, Paul’s love letter to the church has much to say to us. For he provides images that we can live into and, in many respects, images we are already living into, images of a living life flowing through us, images that are shaping who we are, allowing us to get caught up in the joyous flow of grace and gratitude, grace and gratitude, grace and gratitude—more and more, more and more, more and more. There is so much for which we can be grateful as a congregation. This church is not perfect. No church anywhere in the world is perfect. It’s not about being perfect. It’s about being open to what the Spirit is doing through us. And we can be grateful for the grace that is flowing through us, and all of the gratitude and joy that come with it.

In a recent conversation with Brené Brown, Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest and writes, said that Christianity is still in its infancy, that the church's best days are not behind us but before us because we are still in the process of growing, growing up and growing into and fully fathoming the height and depth and meaning of the gospel, we are still discovering how to be the followers of the living Christ.¹ And, so, we face the future with confidence because God hasn't given up on the church. God will never, ever give up on the church. God will never give up on us. For the great work of God that we share and participate in, together, by virtue of our baptism, will continue to grow and flourish through us. That work has started, that work continues, and that work will come to completion in God's good time, when God will bring it to



a flourishing finish—all to the praise and all to the glory of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Brené Brown Podcast: Spirituality, Certitude, and Infinite Love: Part 1 of 2 with Father Richard Rohr. April 20, 2022: <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/spirituality-certitude-and-infinite-love-part-1-of-2/>.