Well Begun, Not Done

Philippians 1:3-11 Kimby Young

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“I thank my God every time I remember you.” I like this scripture passage. I could pray this scripture passage because of you. “I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now,being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” This is the opening phrase of the letter from Paul to one of his most beloved congregations. The church in Philippi was one of Paul’s first churches that he helped to found and one of the few churches who never seemed to have any trouble. He loved the people of this church and they loved him. The occasion for his writing this letter is to respond to them for a gift they had sent to him. This was a thank you note. But, unlike the one pager notes we often send and receive – or the quick emails – this letter became an inspiring encouraging little sermon which was probably read eagerly at the home church in Philippi and re-read over and over for generation after generation. The letter begins as a thank you note, because Paul’s friends in the church in Philippi had taken up an offering and sent it as a love gift to Paul by special messenger. Paul had been in prison for preaching the gospel and was awaiting trial. And the custom in that day was that prisoners were not given meals by their captors. Prisoners had to provide for themselves. If they were to eat, food and drink had to be sent in to prisoners by family or friends. Since Paul could not practice his trade of tent making, he had to rely on savings or gifts from friends in order to survive. So Paul is quite sincere in his gratitude to his beloved friends. “I thank my God for you.” And Paul refers to them as “partners in the gospel” – partners in sharing the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ, partners in showing God’s grace. “I thank my God for you.” But Paul doesn’t stop there – of course. For everything is theology for Paul. Everything is a chance to share the gospel, to teach and to inspire.

Paul says – his prayers of joy and gratitude for them are because…”I am confident of this, that God who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” This is the phrase that struck me as I was preparing for this sermon and listening for God’s word today for this congregation in Gardner. The reason I am so thrilled to be here in Gardner; The reason I thank God for you, is exactly this. God started the ministry that is happening here at First Presbyterian Church of Gardner. God has kept this ministry alive and thriving for the last 150 years. God has inspired new work and new programs and new people for each generation. And I am confident – as confident as Paul was – that God will continue to bless this ministry in this congregation. As Paul says……”I am confident of this, that God who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” We have not reached the stage of completion. We have not done everything God calls us to do. We have not finished the race and welcomed in the kingdom of Jesus Christ for all time. So God is still with us and we still have work to do. And God will carry on this ministry in Jesus Christ.

We have a strong heritage in faith – a legacy – for the past 150 years in this place – but even before that all the way back to Philippi, or Jerusalem, or even the garden of Eden. We have a legacy that will continue well beyond today. Our charge, our challenge, is to move that legacy forward in faith. And how? Paul’s opening in this letter spells that out for us as well. Paul says, “this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.” It’s a 3 part prayer. One – “that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.” That is that love for God and love for others will lead to knowledge of God, insight and inspiration. Part Two – that insight leads to discernment and understanding of God’s will – “to know what is best to be pure and blameless” – that is to do what is right. And part Three – “to be filled with the fruit of righteousness, or the fruit of right living.”

What would it mean for us that our love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight? I think the first part is obvious. We need to show love to God, to one another, to people outside these walls, to neighbors in Gardner, to people in need all over the world. We need to find more and more ways to show and to share God’s love. And this is not just an emotional caring, this is an active doing of God’s boundless love. Love even our enemies. Love those who need it the most. Love those who are unlovable. Love even ourselves as children of a loving God. We do a pretty good job. We do a lot of caring and sharing, but there is always more room for more love. Now the second part of this charge is the interesting part today. Paul says that if we love, and if our love continues to grow, then that loving will lead to “knowledge and depth of insight.” Now I don’t think this knowledge Paul is speaking about is book knowledge or education. I think this is insight like I know my sister or my friend. Paul is saying if you love without bounds, if you love frequently and fully, if your love continues to grow, if you live a life of loving actions and thoughts and words – then you will come to know God, you will be inspired, you will receive insight into God’s will for the world and God’s will for you, you will feel the presence and power of God in your life – if you love, if your love continues to abound more and more.

Which leads to part two of the prayer – if you love, if you come to know God and be inspired, then you will be able “to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.” Some of you are saying “pure and blameless” yea, right. But theologically, Yes! Right! This isn’t saying we can be or need to be perfect. This is saying - if love is our center; that is if Christ is our focus, than we will be right in God’s presence. It’s not that we will never make mistakes, it is that God will make even our mistakes turn out right. God will help us to do the right things. God will help us to make the right decisions. God will inspire us to imagine the best that can possibly be. You can think about what that means for you individually. But what that means for us communally – for us as a church – is if love is our focus, God will inspire us to dream big and to accomplish miracles right here in our little corner of Gardner or even the whole world. God will tell us what to do, if we listen. This scripture says, “You will be able to discern what is best.” You have heard it. Now it is time to do it.

Which leads to part three of the prayer – filled with the fruit of righteousness, or the fruit of right living – to the glory and praise of God. Here’s the bottom line. If we are loving, if we are discerning what is best, if we are doing God’s will and sharing God’s love, then there will be something to show for it. We will bear fruit. People will be able to see it and taste it and touch it and be nourished by what is produced here thru this church. Is there evidence of God’s love in our actions at First Presbyterian Church of Gardner? I’ve said it before, I will say it again, the point of all our celebration of our 150th anniversary is not about looking at the past. It is about continuing that legacy into the future. “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion.” Our anniversary celebration is about taking that wonderful foundation of faithful living and building on that legacy for something even more beautiful to the glory of God in this time and place. How is God calling us to produce good fruit on this day and in this community? That is what we have to figure out. Now some of it we are already doing – in our mission and ministry, in our fellowship and service, in our care for one another and our care for those in need. But is there more we can be doing? Is there more we are called to be sharing? Are there ways we can reach out in our community to bring the love of Christ to others? That is what we are trying to discern in the next couple of months. That is what we are trying to put into action – even starting today. So in all honesty, and complete sincerity, I pray Paul’s prayer from Philippians for this congregation of First Presbyterian Church. And I invite you to pray it as well in the days ahead.

“I thank my God every time I remember you. I am confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.” Amen.