

“Harvest of Righteousness”

Philippians 1:1-11

October 4, 2020

Read Philippians 1:1-11

This is the Word of the LORD.

Prayer of Invocation

Today is World Communion Sunday. This is not a high church holiday, like Easter or Christmas or Maundy Thursday or anything like that. You will not find a commandment in Scripture to observe this particular day on the first Sunday of October each year. The truth is this coordinated celebration of the Lord’s Supper originated with Presbyterians in 1936. With Europe fragmenting and the winds of World War II just beginning to blow, the Presbyterian Church developed this event to help Christians all over the world affirm their unity in Jesus Christ. Many other denominations have chosen to recognize it and participate in it. Given the upheaval of 2020 – the pandemic; the fires, hurricanes, and other natural disasters; the election and social unrest – the need for bearing witness to our unity in Christ is just as relevant today as it was then, if not more so.

The idea is simple but powerful. Christians remembering Jesus by obediently repeating the act of breaking bread together in his name is an amazing testimony to the truth of the gospel: it is a fulfillment of the risen Jesus’ prophetic commission to the Apostles in Acts 1:8, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Well, here we are at this end of the earth. Here around this table is our witness: our hope is in Jesus Christ.

Philippians

As we begin this sermon series on Paul’s letter to the Philippians, it is important to know two things. First, Paul wrote this letter – it is a letter, not really a “book” – Paul wrote this letter to friends. Unlike some of the other letters Paul wrote, there was no crisis or doctrinal schism threatening the church in Philippi. They faced opposition and had problems, to be sure; however, this letter was sent to friends thanking them for their prayers and support during Paul’s imprisonment for the gospel. We are going to talk more about Paul’s situation next week. For now, as we read Philippians, just know we are reading loving correspondence between friends.

The second thing to know was that Paul was exhorting the Philippians to understand the mission he had declared to them. Paul intended this letter to mobilize the Philippians to action. So many times in the church we think of missions and missionaries as servants who go to deliver a message to passive recipients. Not so with Paul; Paul thought of his apostolic role as a general marshalling the troops to go forward. Paul believed and taught that disciples have an active responsibility: believers are to mobilize to go make disciples (think of the risen Jesus’ Great Commission in Matthew 28), and they are to grow in Christ as they go. Paul wrote to the church in Philippi to urge them on in active faith. They are to go and bear fruit – not to earn their salvation, but as a joyful response to the salvation they had received.

Paul's background

Before we get too far into the text this morning, I want to review some of Paul's history. Paul began life as Saul, a highly motivated and privileged achiever within Jewish society. As we will see later in this letter, he was born into a proud heritage. He had the best education. He had incredible opportunities for advancement. He was a rising star in the elite of Jerusalem. He took seriously – deadly seriously – the responsibility to preserve the purity of the faith: the Jewish faith, that is. As a result of his zeal, he was an energetic and motivated persecutor of the Way, which is how the followers of Jesus were known.

Much of the narrative information we have about Paul is found in Acts – part 2 of the material written by gospel author Luke. Luke was a travelling companion of Paul's for a while. In Acts 9, Luke recounted Paul's Damascus Road conversion – from which the phrase, "come-to-Jesus moment" arises.

Paul – at that time, Saul – had asked and received from the Jewish leaders power akin to secret police. He was charged with the responsibility to search out and arrest believers. He had already witnessed the stoning death of one of Jesus' followers, Stephen, and had approved. Like so many of the Biblical heroes we read about; Saul did not have clean hands. He was not Jesus, by any stretch of the imagination. He later would write to Timothy that he was, "formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence." (1 Timothy 1:13)

Then on the way to Damascus to stop the spread of the gospel there, Saul was knocked to the ground during an encounter with the risen Lord Jesus. His life was never the same after. The one-time persecutor of the gospel became its champion advocate. That is the Paul we have come to know.

Paul became the "Apostle to the Gentiles." His ministry – which is what we call his travels; his arguing in the synagogues and marketplaces; and his arrests, torture, and exiles – forced the issue of how the gospel would extend beyond Israel. Paul's ministry was the fulfillment of God's promises thousands – yes, thousands – of years before: to bless all the families of the earth through the descendants of Abraham.

Paul went on three missionary journeys around Asia Minor and the Mediterranean, starting churches wherever he went. Luke provides us with a lot of detail about this specific instance – in Philippi. It is worth hearing this to get a sense of Paul:

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, "The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace." But Paul replied, "They have beaten us in public, uncondemned men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves." The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; so they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. After leaving the prison they went to Lydia's home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed. (Acts 16:11-40)

In those verses you get a sense of the character of Paul. As zealous as he was a persecutor of the church as Saul, *how much more* zealous did he become as Paul in his passion for Christ and sharing the gospel. That is how the message about Jesus spread: one person telling another. And, just as

we see with Paul, it is important to know that sharing the gospel can be dangerous. It challenges kings and kingdoms. It angers people who do not believe, or want to make money for themselves from spiritual things. But to those who believe and become disciples, it is such good news that it is worth suffering for it.

As best we can estimate, Paul's first visit to Philippi was in 49 A.D. Paul went on with his travels and adventures but never forgot the Philippians; nor did they forget him. From other places in Scripture, we gather that Paul visited Philippi several times after the initial time described in Acts 16. They supported Paul financially, spiritually, and physically – later in the letter we will see Paul's thanks for providing him the services of Epaphroditus. Paul bragged about the Philippians to other congregations. Somewhere, twelve to fifteen years after their initial time together – between 60 and 62 A.D. – and while in prison in Ephesus or Rome, Paul wrote this letter.

“I thank God every time I remember you.”

In these first eleven verses Paul brings greetings to the Philippians. These were words of connection, designed to remind the readers/listeners of his fondness for them, how he remembered the times they shared together, and to bring a note of encouragement.

I want to spend a few moments on two things Paul touched on in these verses. The first is Paul's giving thanks for the memory of their fellowship. The second is Paul's prayer for them.

“I thank God every time I remember you.” Do you have people about whom you could say this? It is not a throw-away line or flattery; it is genuine appreciation for the gift of fellowship. These days, we might say it this way, “When we get together, it feels like we were never apart. We pick right up and everything seems better.”

Let me stop here for a moment to dwell on this thought: **friends in faith are a gift from God.** Friends in faith are a gift from God. They are people you can trust. They are people you can count on in an emergency. They are people around whom you can let down your guard. They are an encouragement.

What does that mean? Well, think of it this way: when you are in a situation that demands a hard choice, whose faces come to mind? To whom do you turn for counsel? Who are the people influencing your decision; the ones whose cheering is valuable to you, the ones you would do almost anything to avoid disappointing?

Or, who are the people you remember as you struggle to get through hard times?

Paul was saying to the Philippians that they were those people for him. Paul was giving thanks to the Philippians because they were friends who shared his faith, shared his values, and supported his mission; they were an encouragement because he could remember their love when he was facing opposition and hardship. He experienced their love in the midst of the hardship he was currently experiencing.

The point here is this: everyone has friends, but Paul *thanked God* for his friends. It was not a general thank you to the universe or chance; he thanked God.

During this time of enforced separation, many of us have expressed the longing to be back together. I have lamented the loss of the sound of our voices rising collectively in songs of praise to God. We have gained a new appreciation for the gift we have been given in each other. In reading Paul's words, however, I realized that I have spent a good deal of time over these last months complaining to God about our being apart; and yet have failed to thank God for our times together. Those are two different things: my complaints are about me; thanksgiving is about God and what God has done.

What about you? Do you thank God every time you remember those with whom he has blessed you?

This is my prayer...

Later in our verses, Paul wrote, "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, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."

This was a "where we are going" statement. It was a reminder that the days are not our own, they belong to God. It was a stewardship message. The things we have to do are not our own, they belong to God. We are his servants, not the other way around. The love that we have is not our own, it belongs to God. We are his children. Paul was praying that the Philippians' faith would grow deeper. He was praying that God would bless them with eyes wide open now into eternity, to see how they were living into the kingdom of Heaven.

Where are you headed? How are you spending your time and your days?

Many people seem to never look up to see the bigger picture. For many of us right now, the burden of the pandemic and the other circumstances can feel overwhelming. For parents trying to raise their children day to day can be overwhelming: all that is needed to make sure their children are healthy, to make sure they are progressing, to give them opportunities to succeed in adulthood. Then, suddenly, they find themselves in an empty-nest wondering, "Now what? Now what am I supposed to do?" There are the careerists who devote themselves to success in business. They spend nights and weekends in the office, they sacrifice relationships in order to be available to those who will help them get ahead, and they strive and strive to accomplish records and goals – and then find themselves lonely and depressed when they get there because there is no one with whom to share.

Now, to be clear: successful parenting and a good work ethic are virtuous; however, they are not the end or goal in and of themselves. They are virtuous only in a larger context of where we are headed: eternity and living into the kingdom of Heaven. This is what Paul was writing: may God grant you more knowledge and insight to determine what is right so that you will produce the kinds of fruit that will be celebrated in the kingdom of Heaven. How are you training up your children in

the knowledge of God's love? How are you bearing witness to the eternal truth of salvation in Jesus Christ in how you use your gifts – are you working for yourself or are you working for the glory of God?

“The harvest of righteousness” is not measured in material things, popularity, fame, power, or money. The fruit is the blessing you have being in relationship with others. It is found in how you exercised the gifts God has given you – whatever those gifts are – in building up the body of Christ.

That brings us back to this table on World Communion Sunday. Communion is the great reminder of our unity: we all stand in need at the foot of the cross. We are all sinners in need of a savior. What brings and holds us together as the body of Christ is the unifying power and lordship of Jesus.

By sharing in this meal together, we are bearing witness to your unity in him. By sharing in this meal together, we encourage one another. By sharing in this meal together, we are doing what is best in the big picture. By sharing in this meal together, we are telling the gospel by our actions. By sharing in this meal together, God will use us to produce a harvest of righteousness. And, by sharing in this meal together, we look forward with knowledge and insight into eternity, anticipating the day when we will share – face-to-face – in a banquet with the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Friends, the gospel of Jesus is shared like we want to share this meal: one person passing along to another, one family to another. So, let us prepare our hearts to share – together – this blessing of God by, as Jesus commanded, “doing this in remembrance of me.”

Amen.

Invitation and Lord's Supper

Closing Song: “My Jesus I Love Thee”

Questions:

1. How are you connected to the body of Christ? When you think of World Communion Sunday, is it a nice thought or sentiment – or – does it remind you of those who passed along the faith to you, those who have shared and encouraged you along the way, and those to whom you are bearing witness? Where are you strengthened by the unity of the church? Where do you see the unity of the church being challenged or weakened? What can you do to build it up?
2. For whom are you grateful to God? Whom do you remember with thanksgiving? Make a list of the names, and write beside them the ways they have lifted you up.
3. How are you structuring your life to produce a harvest of righteousness in the day of Christ? How are you responding to the salvation you have received as a gift?