

Gratitude – Partnership – Hope

November 15, 2018

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Scripture: Philippians 1:3-11

Life is book-ended by saying hello... and saying good-bye. Sometimes the good-bye is only for a day or a season; and sometimes it is forever. While this is not my final good-bye; in a few months, even with its challenges, I will be saying good-bye to a work, role, and calling that I loved, as your General Presbyter.

The Apostle Paul, in the last chapter of his ministry, wrote this beautiful note to the church at Philippi from which we just read his opening words. In a sense, it was his good-bye message to them. The beginning verses of Chapter 1 are a helpful segue for us here in Peace River, as I get ready to say a good-bye, and you get ready to say hello to the person you will be calling to continue this work.

I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴ constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵ because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. 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.

There are three words that come out of these verses that capture what I want to share today: Gratitude – Partnership – Hope.

First, gratitude. I love the way the late Eugene Peterson, the great Bible Scholar and Presbyterian pastor, who just passed away last month, translated this verse in The Message:

³⁻⁶ Every time you cross my mind, I break out in exclamations of thanks to God.

I am grateful to my pastoral colleagues in ministry in Peace River in whose hearts there is a deep calling, whose passions are in sharing a message of faith, hope, and love, and whose service is shaped by our ordination vows, one of which asks: Will you serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?

I am grateful to the ruling elders here and in every congregation, who in our Presbyterian polity are the spiritual leaders - with the pastor – of a congregation. For time and energy and wisdom shared, for figuring out how the church can make a budget, attend to the spiritual yearnings of members and, most importantly, make a difference in your community meeting deep needs, I say thank you.

I am especially grateful to the staff and elected leadership and committee and team members with whom I have worked these 17, going on 18 years. And for my family who has been supportive and given me the time and space to do this work, I break out in an “exclamation of thanks.” And the list can go on.

In Paul’s words to the Philippines, not only does he give thanks in a general way, but specifically:

³ I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴ constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵ because of your partnership (and sharing) in the gospel from the first day until now.

Secondly, Partnership. If there was ever a Presbyterian word it is the word partnership.

Embedded into our theology, as well as our polity, is the sense that we are not alone ... we are not lone rangers. Some think that it is the Book of Order, as a book of rules and regulations, that holds us together. That is important. It is the architecture giving shape to our life together, but without a commitment to relationships and partnership, which is at the heart of who we are, there is no presbytery.

The Apostle Paul knew we were either in this together or not at all... and Paul's letters to the early churches are a concrete demonstration of that partnership....

Today I will be sharing a plate that I bought in Matanzas, from one of the national artists in Cuba, Manuel. This will be left in the Presbytery office as a symbol of that new partnership with Matanzas Presbytery, but look at that picture. It is one that says partnership ... with fields in the background ... we are in this together.

As a presbytery, because of our partnership, we have been able to face together what has come our way.

We have faced some dead-ends, but they have become opportunities to go deep ... and grow. For example, Mision Peniel was born in a conversation I had with elders 15 years ago at Vanderbilt. Beth-El helped that dream become reality; and then at a crossroads point, in Covenant Church 5 years ago, the Presbytery committed to go deep and continue and grow that ministry with those who are the least of these. Every week there are hundreds that are grateful for our partnership in the gospel.

We had challenges, such as when Hurricane Charlie came through, and with the help of PDA we had the opportunity to help re-build 1000 homes and to assist 8 congregations badly damaged.

And recently, with the reality of our changing demographics, and that as a Presbytery, we live in a rapidly growing area, yet our culture is less and less churchied, we wondered, "What are we to do?" I am grateful for those with the vision of reaching out to the next generation, and the next generation of retirees? That is happening because leaders from the Presbytery, and several congregations and pastors realize we are not isolated practitioners; we are in this together and need to figure it out together.

Partnership is embedded in our polity – it is who we are.

But where is this all going? What is the end game? What is the goal? When is our work done – which leads to the third point: **hope**.

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.

Our hope is that God is not finished ... with us or with creation. *The one who began the good work will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. The day of Jesus Christ* was one of the phrases in the early church used to remind them that history is going somewhere.

Jesus, in his teaching, captured that future hope when he spoke of the present and the coming kingdom of God. Every time we pray the Lord's prayer, we pray reminding ourselves of that future/present hope: Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We don't have language or the ability to grasp that the fullness of that day will be reality; so, scripture gives us some picture images and metaphors that say that – the kingdom of God will not be like anything we have ever seen or known before.

In Isaiah we read: On that future day...

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.*

*⁹ They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;*

*for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.*

And on that future day, according to Jesus in the parable of the sheep and the goats, we will be judged on how we treated the least of these ...

And on that day. As we read in Philippians 2:11,
*every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father*

On that day, in the book of Revelations, we read ... in another vivid picture image:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

The time or hour we don't know ... that is irrelevant to our task. That is up to God ... for us it is enough to know that in the end God, who began a good work, will bring it to completion.

We live in hope, and in the belief that God is at work and continues to be at work through us.

Any of us who have had children know the drill on the family vacation. We plan for months, we pack for days, and then early in the morning we load up the car and start to some destination for the long-awaited vacation. Inevitably, less than one hour into the trip come the words from the back seat: "Are we there yet?" Soon to be followed 15 minutes later with: "Are we almost there?"

That is how I have sometimes felt about ministry ... maybe you too! We have planned for months, gotten everything ready, began a new program, preached a sermon series, you name it. We are working to complete a task, and either we think, or someone says: "How much longer will this take? Are we finished?"

So today, as we have done since 1990, in the 100 plus stated meetings of Peace River Presbytery, we will welcome new teaching elders as members and we will pass budgets. But they are not an ending in themselves; rather, we do these things so the mission and vision of the Presbytery can be accomplished.

Today, in the Steering Committee report you will be looking to the future. You will hear about going deeper in 7 strategic areas that, with your new General Presbyter, you will explore and develop. Specially, you will look at new ways to:

1. Support pastors,
2. Equip church leaders,
3. Improve Communications,
4. Encourage greater diversity,
5. Empower outreach,
6. Prepare for transition,
7. Create new and renewed worshipping communities and ministry models.

Question: When will we be done? Will you be done when our new GP is called and installed? Will you be done when some controversial issue is decided? Will you be done when you accomplish all the goals and objectives related to these Strategic Directions? No! But...

- when the lion lies down with the lamb,

- when they neither hurt or destroy,
- when every tear is wiped from their eyes,
- when we speak truth to power and when the powerful recognize character matters and truth matters,
- when we realize how we treat the least of these matters,
- when every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord,

... Then and only then will we be done. That is our hope.

So, until then we keep on working and praying and serving.

I can't wait to see what that will look like here in Peace River, and I can't wait to hear in years to come how that partnership with one another and with your new GP is bearing much fruit.

So, I am grateful... and hopeful; and with the Apostle Paul who said to the Philippians I say to you...

⁹⁻¹¹ 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.

May it be so! Amen!

Philippians 1 - New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

³ I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴ constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵ because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. 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. ⁷ It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, ^[d] for all of you share in God's grace^[e] with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰ to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹ having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.