

Philippians 1:3-11
A Prayer for All of Us
October 22, 2017
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*Play Go, Cubs, Go

*If you've spent any time at Wrigley Field or in the presence of a Cubs fan, you have probably heard that song before. It was written by Steve Goodman, the same man who wrote Arlo Guthrie's song, *City of New Orleans*. He wrote it in 1984 when WGN radio wanted something a little hipper to replace, *It's a Beautiful Day for a Ballgame*. Last year when the Cubs won the World Series, people in Chicago report being able to hear fans singing this song from more than a mile away. And there is nothing like being at Wrigley Field to sing along in person.

Wednesday night, the Cubs played at Wrigley. It was the fourth game of the National League Championship Series. They were playing the Dodgers who had won the first three games of the series. Unable to attend in person, John and I were watching the game at home when a friend tagged me in a post on Facebook. The post was a tongue and cheek request for prayer as the Cubs were ahead, but we had grown used to watching them give the lead away late in the game. My response to my friend's request was, "But what if there are people praying for the Dodgers? How will God decide?" My friend jokingly responded, "Get busy, forget about the Dodgers fans."

As much as I wanted the Cubs to win, I have to admit, I did not pray for them to win. I don't think prayer works that way.

*I don't think God is a giant puppeteer in the sky, directing our lives, causing our favorite sports teams to win, making sure Starbucks doesn't run low on pumpkin spice flavoring, and compelling all things to be just as I want them to be. Although, I have to admit, there are times my prayer life doesn't reflect that. In fact, there are times my prayers seem

more like a Christmas list to Santa Claus than a conversation with the Holy. But really, my understanding of prayer is more about relationship, between me and God, and between me and other people, than it is about getting what I want. I wonder how you would answer the question, “How does prayer work?” or “Why do we pray?”

I think prayer reminds us that we are not alone and that we do not have to carry our burdens, and the burdens of our family, friends, and the world, all by ourselves. When I offer to pray for someone, I’m not volunteering to pull some strings with God...although believe me, sometimes I wish I could. What I am trying to tell him or her is that whatever they are going through, they do not have to do it alone. In fact, you may have noticed, I often pray specifically that a person or group of people will know they are not alone. For many of us, everything is scarier when we are alone.

In fact, science has proven that human beings can endure pain and stress longer when we are not alone. Imagine a man, alone in a room. He is told that when the buzzer sounds, he is to put his arm in a big bucket of icy cold water and keep it there as long as he can stand it. The time is recorded. The next day, the man is asked to return and bring his best friend with him. The experiment is repeated, only this time, his best friend stays in the room with him. The buzzer sounds, and again, the man puts his arm in the icy cold water. Time after time, for men and women, individuals are able to withstand the icy cold water longer when they are not alone.

*This week on social media, as a result of the Hollywood scandal and public accusations pointed at producer and film executive, Harvey Weinstein, in post after post, tweet after tweet, women wrote #metoo, as an acknowledgment that they too had been sexually harassed or assaulted at some point in their lives. It was hard to watch as one friend, one relative, one colleague after another posted #metoo. For

many of us, seeing #metoo over and over again, gave us the courage to acknowledge our own pain and to voice our own #metoo. Many of us found community in our shared anger, frustration, and pain.

Human beings were created for community and prayer draws us into community. Today's text presents an opportunity for us to think about that a little bit.

*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,^[a] for all of you share in God's grace^[b] 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.

These verses are the beginning of Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. Paul founded the church while on his second missionary journey, accompanied by Silas, Timothy, and others. He wrote this letter to the Philippians some years later, while in prison. In this opening to the letter, it seems pretty clear that Paul had a deep affection for the people of the church in Philippi. Paul wrote that each time he thought about his time with them, he felt thankful and joyful. It's not hard for us to imagine that Paul, while in prison, had a lot of time to think about his experiences among the Philippians.

We can also imagine that when the Philippians learned Paul was in prison, it would have been very troubling to them. Later in this letter, we learn that the news of his imprisonment moved them to action, for Paul expressed his confidence in their prayers for him and his thanks for the gifts they sent. I would think, too, that when they received the letter and read it, it would have reminded them of the time they spent with Paul, learning and growing together. It was these shared memories, this connection, that would have made Paul's words of affirmation and hope at the beginning of this letter meaningful to them. These words were written to them by somebody who knew them well, somebody who understood who they were, what they were about, and who loved them, somebody they had grown to love and care about. This remembering, by Paul and the church, wasn't just about the past though. It was about so much more. You see, our memories shape the reality in which we live today and our memories shape all of our tomorrows as well. And if you think about it for a moment, you will undoubtedly find that the vast majority of your really important memories are tied to people you love. For the Philippians and their beloved church planter, the foundation of their shared stories was Jesus. In that community, Jesus was remembered and God's love was made real over and over again. The same is true for all communities who seek to follow the ways of Jesus.

The memory of Jesus renews itself in the life of community. These memories aren't just a trip down memory lane, but a forward memory that draws the community into a future that is already transforming the present. As followers of Jesus, these memories are ours too. Their meaning and their power come, not only from the shared love of our faith ancestors, like Paul and the Philippians, and not just from the love we share today, but in the hope of that love's fulfillment in, as Paul wrote, *the day of Christ*. In this letter, Paul affirmed that God would bring the work of the church in Philippi to completion before Christ returned, which Paul expected would be very soon. We know the *day of*

Christ did not come and has not come in the shape Paul expected. And clearly, the work of the church, whether in Philippi or Bartlesville has not come to completion.

These prayed hopes that Paul had for the Philippian church are not confined to ancient times. The hope, he wrote about, that we will grow to understand one another more fully, causing us to love one another better...that hope is still alive today. Each time we are face to face with another human being, listening, learning, and loving, that hope is alive. The hope that, in spite of our propensity to do the wrong thing, we strive to do the right thing, the virtuous thing...that hope is still alive today. Aristotle wrote about what it means to be a virtuous person. He wrote that being virtuous involves 3 things:

Making right choices

Making right choices voluntarily

Making right choices voluntarily over a period of time.

It's doing the just, peaceful, compassionate, loving thing, over and over again, not because we have to but because we want to, and even when nobody is looking. That hope is alive.

Yes, Paul's prayed hopes are just as fitting today, for Disciples Christian Church, as they were 2000 years ago for the church in Philippi. Our life together is still centered on the ways of Jesus and the love that breaks in from the past, directing our here and now. It's true. But, Paul isn't here and Paul didn't know you. So, while I appreciate Paul's words to the Philippians, I think I can do better for you.

I thank our God every time I think about you. I thank God when I see your names listed as Board members of community organizations that work to level the playing field for the most vulnerable people in Bartlesville. I thank God when I read your letters to the editor, critiquing systems which do not work for people who are poor,

addicted, and underrepresented and lifting up our neighbors who are being treated unfairly.

I thank God when I see our church van being driven around town, providing transportation to the ones who have no other way to get to work or to the doctor's office. I thank God when you attend to details...details that make worship meaningful, that provide transparency with regard to our finances, and that allow us to enjoy being together. I thank God for the ways you love our children and our neighbors' children by dressing up like super heroes, making capes, and asking them questions that start with, "I wonder...", rather than telling them what the Bible has to mean to them. I thank God when I call your home and you are away delivering meals, volunteering at the hospital, or taking communion to one of our members.

I thank God for your ability to carry a tune, play the piano and guitar, and your love making things beautiful and sparkly. I thank God that you can cook, fix things, and embed videos in PowerPoints. I thank God that you think nothing of 90 Boy Scouts taking over the building, soccer players running up and down the field next door, and families who have nowhere else to go, resting their tired, worried bodies here.

And I thank God that even after giving all of that, you are generous with your support and encouragement, you never fail to ask me how I am doing, you send me flowers when I've had a bad day, and you remind me in so many ways that I am enough, even when I'm sure that is not true. I thank God that you get it...we are better together and that sharing the gospel isn't telling people what they have to believe, it's showing them what God believes, and what we believe, about them and their worth.

I pray, that you will fully embrace the love of God for yourselves that you seem to share with others so easily; that you will know in your

hearts that you are enough, that right here in this room there is enough time, talent, and yes, treasure, to be the church God wants us to be right now. I pray that you will take time to celebrate the beauty that is all around us and the ways in which you make a difference in the lives of all who love you and in the lives the people who benefit from your joyful, humble service.

I pray that you will find ways to put your deeply felt passions to work and be amazed when things beyond your imagination happen, that you will live from God's abundance, believing that there is plenty and that you will remember that you are never alone, that you will never stop noticing that loving people changes them and you. And last, I pray that you know that on good days and bad, you belong here, you are each a unique, one of a kind part of the church God is calling us to be together. Amen.