

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. 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. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. 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. **Philippians 1:3-11**

Have you ever run across a stash of letters from years and years ago? Perhaps letters from your parents or grand; parents to each other during courtship. Letters that were too valuable at the time to throw away; letters they thought no one else would ever see.

In such letters we often see a side of someone we did not know about. A grumpy and stern grandfather sounds like a teddy bear in his love letters to your grandmother. Or your mother says things to your father that she never dreamed you would read some day.

Last Sunday and today we have a peek at two such personal letters: last Sunday, Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica, one of the first New Testament documents to make it into print – Paul's earliest correspondence. And today, Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, probably the last letter he wrote. The letter today is especially poignant because Paul seems quite certain that this is his last opportunity to correspond with these people he dearly loved. Hands down, this was Paul's favorite congregation. His respect and admiration for them was matched by their respect and affection for him.

By the time Paul writes this letter to the church in Philippi he has finally made it to Rome, which has been an important goal for quite some time. He was arrested for preaching and was warned to stop, but would not. He is now in prison. He may have been told by now that he will be executed, or he may be waiting for such news which is almost certain to come soon. This letter is a farewell letter, Paul's last opportunity to talk with the people he loved; his last chance to talk with them about the things he considers most important for them to remember.

Paul wants the Philippian Christians to know how much they mean to him, how much he loves them. He wants them to know how grateful he is for their help spreading the Gospel in their region and beyond. And, he looks to their future with much hope, even though he will not be around to share it with them.

He wants to help with their future, so he prays for three things: it is a sort of circular reasoning that is easy to follow in English, but makes much more sense in Greek. Because some of the Greek words do not have English equivalents, we miss some of the deeper longings behind each of these prayers

Paul prays for three things: love, insight, and knowledge or wisdom. For Paul, these three things go together. They interlock like links on a bracelet: love, insight, and knowledge/wisdom. For Paul, all three are necessary, and none of them are truly possible in depth without the other two. It is a bit like drawing a circle: you can start at any point and will eventually come back to the place you began, to the place the circle is complete.

For Paul, love is an attitude of respect and compassion, but it is more. Love is action. Love is demonstrated in how far you are willing to go to help someone else. Love is demonstrated in our ability to love our neighbor as ourselves. Love is demonstrated in worrying about ourselves less and others more.

Such love, says Paul, leads to insight. In striving to love and serve others we gain insight about life, about God, about others, and about ourselves. Until we experiment with striving to put love into action, with loving others as Christ loves us, these new insights are not available. We have all had this experience: we go home from doing a good deed and feel both tired and refreshed at the same time. We go home from the Norman Christmas Dinner or help with Food for Friends, and we notice that our feet ache but we are glad we went. Through demonstrating compassion and respect in tangible ways, we experience and learn things we could never learn otherwise.

These insights, according to Paul, lead to knowledge, to wisdom. Wisdom that allows us to see how things fit, to some degree: to build a view of the world on foundations that matter, to understand things that may not make sense at first glance, or even at closer scrutiny until these insights break through. In the 11th century St. Anselm wrote: “I don’t see understanding in order that I might believe; I believe in order that I might understand.” That is exactly what Paul is telling his dear friends: by loving behavior you gain insight into yourself and into God’s world. And this insight will lead you to wisdom.

Then Paul completes the circle: wisdom, true wisdom, leads us to deeper love. True wisdom allows loving others to become a way of life. Advent is a perfect time for us to reflect on the circle Paul has drawn. To reflect on this end-of-life wisdom Paul shares with friends and colleagues miles and miles away. End-of-life wisdom that comes down to us years and years later.

Faith, according to Paul, has its beginning in love – recognizing that God loves us. In grateful response to that love, we strive to love others as we are able. And when we begin that process of loving others in a tangible way, new insight comes. And eventually those moments of insight begin to link up and change the way we see the world, the way we see God, and the way we see ourselves.

When the way we see the world changes, when the way we see God changes, and when the way we see ourselves changes, we become new people – people capable of deeper love. No wonder Paul said: through faith in Christ the old self passes away and a new and deeper self is born. And in this new self, the second coming of Christ finds a home, a home where love, insight, and wisdom guide our way and continue to transform our lives. Amen.

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