

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

February 24, 2019
 The Rev. Beth Hilkerbaumer
 First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa
 Text: Philippians 1:3-6, 9-11

SCRIPTURE

Philippians 1:3-6, 9-11 from *The Message*

Every time you cross my mind, I break out in exclamations of thanks to God. Each exclamation is a trigger to prayer. I find myself praying for you with a glad heart. I am so pleased that you have continued on in this with us, believing and proclaiming God's Message, from the day you heard it right up to the present. There has never been the slightest doubt in my mind that the God who started this great work in you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day Christ Jesus appears.

⁹⁻¹¹ So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover's life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God.

SERMON

This past week, the reality that I am leaving finally hit me. I put off packing as long as I could because to be honest, I don't like it and I'm not very good at it (just ask Carrie Dancy and Nancy Jennings), but I knew that Friday, when the movers would be coming, was fast approaching. So as boxes got packed, as I did some of my last things like the last FPC meeting, the last staff lunch, or my last sermon to you, I have shed lots of tears (and more this morning). But they have been joyful tears and ones full of wonderful memories...memories that even took me back to 1986 and the first time I left Iowa. It was my 7th birthday when my parents, with 2 cars, two cats, and two impatient kids, drove out of Sac City. I don't remember much of that day but the image that has stuck with me was the water tower. It is the first thing you see coming into town...my mom remembered it as they arrived over nine years earlier, and it was the last thing we passed on our way out.

Since I was still fairly young when we moved to Ohio I didn't have the same connections to Iowa friends like my parents or even my brother. Most of my memories come from stories or pictures. So I never considered myself an Iowan...until now. One of my first thoughts when I accepted the call to come here was, "Boy, God must have a sense of humor to bring me back to Iowa after all these years!" I never thought I would come back. But somehow I knew this was going to be the right place in my first visit here. The weekend I came to do the neutral pulpit the APNC had Roger Flink drive me around Marion and tell me about the community. When he asked me where I was from, instead of saying Ohio like I usually did, I told him I was from a small town right here in Iowa. He asked me for the name of it and I remember thinking it was a long shot that he would know it. So when I told him I was born in Sac City I was surprised by

his reaction. He got all excited because, as it happened, that is his hometown too. What are the odds? I had never met another person from Sac City until then. He started asking me about this or that person. Not really sure who any of them were I did something very unorthodox...I called my parents. Names were mentioned and Roger would say, "that was my Sunday school teacher" and my parents would respond, "that was our neighbor!" I drove back to Chicago trying not to get too excited but thinking that this is where I wanted to be and where God just might be calling me. But even as Charley and Kirk loaded the U-Haul and I made the transition here four months later I knew that someday I would leave Iowa again.

It is a hard lesson to learn that everything is just for a little while, for the time being. Everything has its good-byes—its beginning and its ending, every relationship, every job, every stage of life. Even when you are not the one leaving there are still good-byes to be said...to children going off to college or new jobs...good-byes to loved ones returning home to the loving arms of God...good-byes to people who are moving on to new opportunities and following God's call to new places. Good-byes work both ways. And they are hard work.

Paul is saying good-bye in his letter to the Philippians and he expresses his feelings with thanksgiving. He thanks the church for all they have done, he tells them that he is praying for them, and he reminds them of the good work ahead of them. Friendship is at the heart of this letter and Paul can't help but to remember the first day with these people.

No other church of which we know ministered to Paul like the church at Philippi. Ten years later, after the birth of the church and 800 miles away as he sits in Rome, Paul writes this letter. And though they are 800 miles apart, and it has been ten years since they began this journey with God, it is as though he is sitting right there with them.

So I can't help but to relate to Paul here. When the church of Philippi came to mind it was an attitude of gratitude that filled Paul's mind and heart, not grumbling, not grief...just gratitude. That is the heart of my message to you this morning. Wherever the Lord will take me in the future, I will carry you in my heart. I think this is exactly how Paul felt for the Philippians.

Rosemary Radford Reuther is a church historian. She says there are two things the church must do. One is to pass on the tradition from one generation to another. King Arthur sings a song in Camelot: "Ask ev'ry person if they've heard the story, and tell it loud and clear if they have not." Tell the story of Jesus to your children and your children's children. But that's not all, says Reuther. There is a second thing the church must do. Be open to the winds of the Spirit by which the tradition comes alive in each generation.

As we celebrate our years together today, we do so confident of the love of Christ present here in this community giving us laughter and fellowship, work and purpose, friendship, and a great story to tell. We say our good-byes knowing that God goes with you and with me into the unfolding of our futures.

My heart overflows with gratitude for all of you, for this time together and for God's work through us. I am reminded of a Peanuts cartoon, you all know how I love comics, where

Lucy complains, “My life is a drag. I’m completely fed up. I never felt so low in all my life.” Linus responds, “When you are in a mood like that you need to be thankful and count your blessings.” Lucy replies, “I could count all my blessings on one finger. What do I have to be thankful for?” Linus continues, “Well, for one thing, you have a little brother that loves you.” With that Lucy runs over and gives Linus a big hug. Linus says, “Every now and then, I say the right thing.”

Well, unlike Lucy, I can count over 300 blessings in each of you and I am thankful for the love you have shown me. And I hope at some point in the eight years I have been your pastor, I have said the right thing. Paul is expressing his gratitude with all the right words and I can think no better way to speak my last words to you from this pulpit than to echo his words and love for the church at Philippi: Listen again to Paul’s words and my words to you.

Every time you cross my mind, I break out in exclamations of thanks to God. Each exclamation is a trigger to prayer. I find myself praying for you with a glad heart. I am so pleased that you have continued on in this with us, believing and proclaiming God’s Message, from the day you heard it right up to the present. There has never been the slightest doubt in my mind that the God who started this great work in you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day Christ Jesus appears. So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover’s life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God.

My friends, it is our joy to rejoice and praise and enjoy God forever. So thanks for the memories and may you remember, God is not finished. So may it be...for you and for me. Amen.