

Philippians: The Gift of Community
Sermon 10-21-18
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Philippians 2:19-30

¹⁹I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news of you. ²⁰I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. ²¹All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. ²²But Timothy's worth you know, how like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. ²³I hope therefore to send him as soon as I see how things go with me; ²⁴and I trust in the Lord that I will also come soon. ²⁵Still, I think it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus—my brother and co-worker and fellow soldier, your messenger and minister to my need; ²⁶for he has been longing for all of you, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. ²⁷He was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one sorrow after another. ²⁸I am the more eager to send him, therefore, in order that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. ²⁹Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honor such people, ³⁰because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me.

Message:

(Play video at https://store.rightnow.org/Products/Downloadable_Video_Illustrations/6222/A_Home_at_Church) Too often we take for granted the gift that we have as a community of believers. Many of you have been part of this community for many years. Many of you have the rootedness of family. If something goes wrong in your life, you have many people around you for support. If something magnificent happens in your life, you have people to celebrate with you. But, sadly, many people in this world don't have such support. And if you've ever had to search for a church home, you know how hard it can be to find a place that fits. A place that is warm and inviting. A place where you can establish deep relationships and friendships. A place where it feels like home. A community that holds a special place in your heart.

When I read this passage of Philippians, I get this sense that Paul has a deep affection for Epaphroditus, Timothy and the Philippian people. He may even call Philippi "home." "¹⁹I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news of you." Remember, Paul is in prison at the writing of

this letter. And there was no internet or phones. This is an oral culture. News mostly spreads by word of mouth or by messengers. Paul wants to send Timothy because he wants to hear of the good things the Philippians are doing. Paul expects the Philippians to do great things in the name of Lord. We can tell that Paul thinks highly of these people. But Paul doesn't just think highly of the Philippians, but of Timothy and Epaphroditus as well. ²⁰"I have no one like him [Timothy] who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare." And in verse 22, "Timothy's worth you know, how like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. ²³I hope therefore to send him as soon as I see how things go with me..." Who is Timothy? Well...if you read through your New Testament you know that there is a 1 and 2 letter to Timothy. Yes, this is the same Timothy Paul speaks of here in Philippians. Timothy was a native of Lystra. Paul and Barnabas visited Lystra on Paul's first missionary journey found in Acts 14. During that first visit is when Timothy must have converted. And then in Acts 16 it says, "Paul went on also to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. As they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily." Timothy was a son to a Jewish mother, but a Greek father. Since his parentage was mixed, he wasn't circumcised. And as you probably know, circumcision in the early church was a big issue for debate. Paul speaks against the Jewish practice as a sign of righteousness or obedience to God. But Paul also knows that if Timothy doesn't get circumcised it will impede their ability to step into synagogues and preach the gospel. So Paul had him circumcised, not because he agreed with the belief, but he didn't want this to impede the spread of the gospel. So as you can imagine traveling and sharing the gospel together, Timothy has become Paul's protégé. He calls him a "son" and one who has "genuine concern." "Genuine concern..." is a synonym for true agape love. Love that is unconditional. Love that does not have to be earned or deserved. Love that is not influenced by emotion. Unwavering, committed, love. So Paul doesn't just want to send Timothy because he can be a messenger for him, but that Timothy will care for these people just as Paul or Jesus would care for them. And in fact, Timothy has the perfect background to minister to these people. His father is a Greek. And this is a mostly gentile town comprised of retired Roman soldiers.

Of Epaphroditus, Paul says pretty positive things about him as well, ²⁵"Still, I think it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus—my brother and co-worker and

fellow soldier, your messenger and minister to my need; ²⁶for he has been longing for all of you, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill.” Who is Epaphroditus? What did he mean to Paul? We don’t know as much about Epaphroditus. He’s a spiritual brother to Paul. He’s part of the church or Christian family. He’s a co-worker. What does that mean? Paul is in prison, so he needed some trivial things done for him. Paul couldn’t preach the gospel at this time. So, practically speaking, Paul needed someone to run errands for him. But Paul doesn’t take this for granted. You can tell in our passage that Paul deeply appreciates Epaphroditus’ practical help. Especially since Epaphroditus’ help leads to illness for him. But this is part of being in community, right? Sometimes we all just need some practical help and that’s gesture enough of love. Paul says that Epaphroditus is “your messenger.” “Your” meaning Philippi’s messenger. So Epaphroditus comes from the Philippian community. As you’ll discover later in Philippians, Epaphroditus was sent as a gift from the Philippian to help Paul. But because Epaphroditus got sick, things don’t work out as planned. It’s not just Paul who longs to see this community, Epaphroditus desires the same thing. Epaphroditus may have a bit of home sickness. This all reinforces how special this community is.

If I were to put myself in Paul’s shoes at the writing of this letter, I would venture to say that I would feel pretty lonely in prison. And I would be constantly reminded of the threat of death. And here, I have two people, Timothy and Epaphroditus that I have discipled. I have a couple of choices. I can continue to resist this reality that death is looming and continue to think that I’m the “big dog” in town leading this generation of believers. Or I can resign to do nothing because I’m trapped in prison and just wait until my possible end or release. Or I can decide to build up the church from afar. Obviously, Paul chose that last choice. In Paul’s mind, there is still work to be done in the name of Christ. Paul could speak poorly of Epaphroditus and Timothy only to simply build himself and his status. That would be the worldly or the Roman thing to do. Status was everything in Roman culture. You did whatever you had to do to elevate your social standing in the culture. If that meant speaking poorly of another, you did so. If that meant cheating someone so that you gained wealth, you did so. In many ways, Roman culture isn’t too different than 21st Century American culture. In verse 21, Paul references this notion as he speaks of the Roman people, “²¹All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.” In our passage today, it might just seem like narrative of the story. Just factual data. But the underlying current between Paul, Epaphroditus, Timothy and the Philippians is mutual respect and affection for one another. Paul is exemplifying exactly what he says in chapter 2:3, “³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as

better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

Paul spends a little bit of time critiquing the Rome community, but spends the rest of our passage elevating others above himself. Epaphroditus “...has been distressed because you heard that he was ill.²⁷ He was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one sorrow after another.” Again, word doesn’t travel fast. Inferred in Paul’s words is that the Philippians have concern for Epaphroditus. They care about him because he is one of them. They love him. Paul again gives thanks for Epaphroditus. Because Epaphroditus has cared for Paul in ways that has saved Paul’s life. Even if it meant that Epaphroditus risked his own life. So we see this mutual willingness to die for each other just as Christ died for us. Paul and Epaphroditus are truly living out Jesus’ words in John 15:13, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Paul continues in his letter, “²⁸I am the more eager to send him, therefore, in order that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious.²⁹ Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honor such people,³⁰ because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me.” It’s likely that Epaphroditus was the one who delivered the letter to the Philippians for this reason. Just a quick point of clarification, Paul isn’t critiquing the Philippians with that last phrase, “...for those services that you could not give me.” Paul is just being practical, they couldn’t offer those services even though they tried through Epaphroditus, but he is grateful that Epaphroditus did what he could.

Witnessing and studying this passage in Philippians, begs this question, “what does healthy Christian community look like?” You know, we spend a lot of time analyzing what’s wrong with our community. We ask questions like, “what are we getting wrong? What could we do better?” Especially in an environment of numerical stagnation on Sunday morning or overall church decline. We focus on all the stuff that we get wrong. Admittedly, I know I’m guilty of this. Here though, Paul, exemplifies healthy and good relationships. He affirms these healthy relationships with his kind words. So, I ask you this question, “what are we getting right?” What are we getting right for the Kingdom of God? In the name of Jesus? They don’t have to be grand stories. Or they could be. One small thing I think we often get right here at Providence is how we care for each other when there is a need. There is such a high level of care here that it would astound many. There is genuine concern, agape love, just as Timothy shows for others. For instance, remember how many years ago many of you stepped up to the plate in helping Liz replace her roof. She presented with a need and you all were glad to help. Or, think about the other year, when Layne and Greg were new to our church and

Layne was pregnant with Gwendolyn. As soon as Gwendolyn was born you rallied to provide meals for Layne and Greg to ease the burdens at home with a new-born child. Remember how when we hear about one of our own, who is in the hospital, many of us make an effort to visit them and provide care. And there are countless other small ways that you all have helped each other. You care deeply about one another and each other's well-being. We seem to rally when there is a need. When one is struggling, there is another to pick them up. When one is in sorrow, there are others to be a comforting presence. When there is great joy, we celebrate with one another. These are signs of the Kingdom. These are just a few of the things that we're getting right.

You see, the Christian life isn't meant to be a lonely endeavor. It isn't meant to be a one-man band. In fact, as we can see in our passage and in Philippians, Paul couldn't have spread the gospel without Timothy and Epaphroditus. Paul needed others to support him. You're not meant to practice your faith in Christ alone. It's not meant to be: you practice your faith in Christ your way and I'll practice it my way. No. If we make it just about a private endeavor of studying the Bible, praying and worshipping, to name a few, we miss out on the beauty of community in Christ. While Jesus needed his times in solitude, he also spent intense times with the disciples. Not only do we miss the accountability that we all need in our faith walk, but we miss out on the mutual love and affection that we might share with each other. Now, I'm probably preaching to the choir this morning on this. But, who isn't here among us this morning that needs Christian community? That needs support. That is missing out on the beauty of this community. Someone may have an issue and you may not have the answer, but when you bring a troubled and lost member, together we can build them up in the name of Christ. As the old adage goes, "It takes a village to raise a child." Well...it takes a village to raise a believer to spirituality maturity in Christ. At its best, this is what the church does. Paul builds up Timothy and Epaphroditus. Timothy and Epaphroditus bless the Philippian community. And the Philippian community blesses Timothy, Epaphroditus and Paul. Not out of mere reciprocity, I give to you so you return the favor, but because there is a deep Christ-like, agape, affection for one another that you can't help but want to bless each other.

What we see in this section of Paul's letter is a deep, affectionate, agape, brotherly, sisterly, Christ-like love for one another. How did this happen? They spent time together. They got to know each other. They grew together in their faith. They blessed one another. Folks, we've done this as a church. And we've done an incredible job at it. I thank you for the affection that you've shown Christine and I over the years. And I pray that it will continue. I pray that you will continue to show that same deep affection for anyone new coming into our midst. I pray that you would invite others who are not with us that could use the support

of Christian community. I pray that we can all have mutually caring relationships just as Paul, Epaphroditus and Timothy had with one another. I pray that we would continue to be a church that people can call home. I pray that we continue not to seek our own interests, but the interests of Christ in our midst. Let's continue to proclaim the love of Jesus Christ not only to each other, but to be the love of Christ to a world around us that sorely needs Christ's presence, this agape love, in their lives. Amen.