

Celebrating Grace Covenant Church's annual Covenant Sunday and 5th Anniversary

It was not the best of times. Some would even say it was the worst. This tiny, fledgling community of faith gathered together to hold one another up, to seek together for strength, for reassurance, for hope for the days to come. Paul, their father in the faith, the first Christian witness “to come over to Macedonia” and help them was in prison, possibly facing death. Epaphroditus, one of their own beloved members whom they had sent to give comfort to Paul, had himself become seriously ill and almost died. They were themselves suffering for their faith—the brunt of jokes and accusation by their neighbors, some of their number had possibly been imprisoned themselves. Not only this, but it’s possible that fellow believers in surrounding communities may have even been jealously raising objections about Paul’s intimate connections with this tiny Christian community in Philippi. The stress may well have been taking its toll. Torn by grief, assailed on every side, this little band was beginning to doubt each other. Division over the source of their troubles and what they should do may have been fracturing their unity and setting them against one another.

Enter Epaphroditus. Sickly and weak, he had been sent home by Paul, armed with a letter especially written for the occasion. Paul’s letter to the Philippians is called, of all things, “the epistle of joy” or “Paul’s letter of thanksgiving.” Is it a misnomer—or more accurately, a misreading of the situation on the part of Paul? Faced with the imprisonment and immanent death of one they loved, locked in a culture of derision and unbelief, harassed on every turn at the hands of the Roman authorities, the occasion seems to have been one for anything but exuberance. Yet, in a situation that could have easily bred doubt, despair and bitterness, Paul opts for thanksgiving and calls the struggling community to which he is writing to thanksgiving. Has he missed the boat? Is he in denial? Is he escaping into fantasy and ignoring the realities that surround him? Or does he put his finger on something that communicates, not just to the Philippian situation, but to our own?

Paul begins with grace and moves to thanksgiving: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” he says. And then he moves on: “I thank my God every time I remember you.” Grace (*charis*) moves to thanksgiving (*eu-charis*), more familiar to us perhaps as *Eucharist* or the Lord’s Supper, a meal of thanksgiving and remembrance. Expressions of the same root word, grace and thanksgiving are integrally connected. Both are rooted in memory of the God who has acted in manifold ways and times and places in history and who is present, acting even now in the community of grace. “I thank my God every time I remember you . . . because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.” Grace, Paul says to us, gives birth to a people of grace—a people whose common life together gives evidence to the gospel they embrace.

Five years ago on the evening of November 12, 2003, six people gathered in a living room to begin dreaming of a new church. Moving from a situation of dashed dreams and impending schism, Rodney and Susan Parrish, Flo Plemmons, Sherry Livengood, Anna Kate Teague and Paula Daniels took the bold step of dreaming again. Somewhat like persons who have gone through a devastating divorce, they chose to reinvest the future with hope. Their numbers have grown from six to eight to thirty-five and fifty-five. We have laughed and celebrated together, and we have wept together. We have received with joy new members into our family—often times friends like us who have been hurt by church but who again seek to place their hope in the God who will do a new thing of grace among us. Together we face the uncertainty of the days that lie ahead as the dark clouds of an economic downturn threaten to overshadow expectations. As with every generation, every moment in time, we have put to us the decision of faithfulness, the decision of living into the future out of the reservoir of strength that flows from the past and from one another. At this moment, as we step from our 5th year into the coming years, our hope is the same as it was for that little church in Philippi and the little church that began in Oak Ridge such a short time ago. People of grace, we, like the generations of the faithful who have gone before us, rest our confidence that “the one who began a good work among [us] will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” In the meantime, we will live and work to that end.

Press on!

sermon digest

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Philippians 3:12-16

larry dipboye

We are in good company. Paul once identified himself among “fools for Christ’s sake.” Have you ever wondered what kind of fools would start a new church in a town full of churches with a small congregation of the retired? The common wisdom associates the future with youth and the past with age. Some of us buy into the myth that all beginnings belong to the young and that seniors need to stay on the side lending moral

support and accept our place as spectators and has-beens. But that viewpoint ignores the factor of age in the covenant with old Abraham and Sarah that resulted in Isaac and the calling of the octogenarian Joshua to occupy the Promised Land. That viewpoint ignores that the object, the goal of life, even for youth is maturity.

Paul was over-the-hill. We can indulge his obsession with his own life and experience; he was in prison contemplating the end of an unfinished life and an unfulfilled calling. At this point, everything he held dear was under the external threat of extermination by the Roman authority under which he was imprisoned or the internal threat of collapse under the weight of theological distortion by immature Christians. Paul's life flashed before him. With exaggerated memories of greatness as a young rabbi Paul flinched at the thought of the young Zealot he had once been. Confronting a similar zealotry in the Philippian church, tongue in cheek, he counts persecution of the church among his accomplishments. The memories that Paul had once viewed as "gains" had become "rubbish" in light of the surpassing value of knowing Christ. So, in a terminal mind-set, Paul longs to share in Christ's suffering, to be like Christ in his death, in order to be like Christ in his resurrection.

Wake up, Paul! Life is not over until it is over. Even in death, life is not over for the people who are in Christ. In spite of an approaching end, Paul resolves to press on, putting the past behind, pressing on to the goal. What's the point? "Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind."

Most of us qualify as "mature," but it seems that maturity here is not about how old or how close to death you may be. According to Paul, maturity is living toward a goal with the determination of an athlete running toward the finish line. Without regard for past accomplishments and failures, you have to leave the past. In spite of present dangers that threaten to stop you dead in your tracks, you must keep your eye on the goal. Maturity is commitment to the end. You can almost see Paul in the gallery of the saints cheering on those who came behind him.

On the night before his death in Memphis, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of the threat of death and having been to the mountaintop with Moses:

Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land.

Maturity looks beyond the limits of a single life to see the Eternal in the community of faith across the boundary of age and human mortality. The writer of Hebrews acknowledged that the hall of champions died before reaching the Promised Land, but not without purpose: "God provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect." (11:40) In the face of obstacles, losses, and limitations beyond description, the word is "press on." We are not finished (perfected) because God is not done with the new creation. We have a pace and example to set. We have a race to run so that someday somewhere someone will cross the finish line.