

More Than a Name

communion meditation

November 18, 20012

Philippians 1:1-6, 9-11; 2:4-9

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It was, to put it mildly, 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, seeking strength, reassurance and hope for the days to come. Paul, their beloved father in the faith, the first Christian witness “to come over to Macedonia and help [them]” was in prison, possibly facing death. Epaphroditus, a beloved brother they had sent to comfort and support him, had become seriously ill and almost died; and they themselves were suffering because of their faith. Some may have been imprisoned, but every one of them as members of this new, seemingly fly-by-night religious cult were the targets of derision and contempt among their neighbors. Add to this the dissension that seems to have been raising its ugly head within the church. We don’t exactly know the nature of the conflict; but reading between the lines, we glimpse where some of the issues may have resided. Some of the animosity, surprisingly enough, was directed at Paul and his relationship with the church. Whether some within the church were accusing Paul of favoritism toward some over others or whether the charges came from other churches in the region, leveled against Paul’s obvious intimate relationship with the tiny community in Philippi, we are not sure. Reading Paul’s letter to the Philippians, we also detect an emerging conflict with so-called Judaizers, those early Christians who claimed the path to Jesus had first to go through conformance with Jewish law. We also detect in the letter a polarization within the church as members chose sides in a contest between two women in the congregation. Whatever the case, the stress under which the small congregation was living seems to have been taking its toll. Torn by grief over the absence and possible impending death of their beloved apostle and 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 seems to have been fracturing their unity, setting them at odds with one another.

Enter Epaphroditus. Sick and weak, he was sent home by Paul, armed with a letter especially composed for the occasion. More than any other epistle written by Paul, it is a letter that brims with loving relationship. It begins with grace and moves to thanksgiving: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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. Coming from the same root word, grace and thanksgiving are integrally connected. They are rooted in remembrance of the God who has acted graciously in manifold ways in the past and who is present, acting even now in the community of grace. Grace, Paul says, gives birth to a people of grace—a people whose common life together bears witness to the grace that has claimed their lives. Guided not by selfish ambition and conceit, but donning the mind of Christ, they act toward one another and toward the world in which they live with overflowing love.

Nine years ago, we began together a journey we came to speak of as Grace Covenant Church. If you recall, we began the journey in the midst of dashed dreams and impending schism; and somewhat like persons who have gone through a devastating divorce, we chose to reinvest the future with hope. You may also recall our struggle over what to call this new little church just starting out in life. We began with the name *Ekklesia*, simply translated “church” and signifying “those called together” or “those called out.” In an effort to come up with a name people could pronounce and yet desiring a name that communicated something significant about who we are, our original steering committee began a search that lasted months. I recall the evening we finally had a breakthrough, when we came up with a name that everyone on the committee did not just accept, but embraced. Grace Covenant Church, you see, signified more than a name. It signified a mission. It captured the sense of what, of *who* we most wanted to be. It captured our basic understanding of the God who comes to us in gracious love, calling us to lifelong commitment to God and one another. Grace Covenant, you see, is a name that we will seek to live into all the days of our life. It is about the grace that gave us birth, the ministry of grace that guides our care for one another and the mission of grace that sends us into the world. And it is about the covenant commitment that guides and shapes all that we are.

As with every generation at 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 gracious gifts of God in the past and from one another. As we approach the end of a decade together, our hope is the same as it was for that little church in Philippi. 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.”

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love . . . , stand firm in the Lord Rejoice in the Lord always. . . . Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard . . . , and the God of peace will be with you (2:4-9).