

“Thanksgiving Memories”

Philippians 1:1-6

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

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I enjoy walking down memory lane this time of year. Like all of you, I have special Thanksgiving memories of people, places and things.

As a child, I remember going out soon after sunrise on the farm with my father to feed and water horses, cows, pigs and chickens. Some years we would walk the fence row looking for rabbits. He carried his favorite 20-Gauge pump shotgun. I carried a stick.

Later that day my parents and three brothers would make the ten mile trek to my grandparents' house where we would join other family members. I remember being greeted by the most wonderful aroma as soon as I walked through the door, the kind that makes your mouth water and your heart beat a little faster.

I usually played outside for an hour or two before we ate, which was fine with me. Being outside, even on a cold day, was better than sitting in a classroom at school, which is where I spent most Thursdays.

I remember seeing every table in the house covered with my grandmother's finest china. Jackie and I now have that china, which is well over one hundred years old.

I remember desserts scattered throughout the kitchen and dining room that teased me while I ate. I remember putting my fork down after taking the last bite of chocolate pie or banana pudding or angel food cake and boldly declaring I would not eat another bite the rest of the day. I remember going back to the kitchen a couple of hours later looking for the desserts I was unable to eat earlier.

Most of all, I remember my grandparents' house was always filled with love, laughter and life at its best. As far as I was concerned, Thanksgiving Day was the closest thing to heaven I could imagine.

Gratitude and memories go together, that is if we choose the right memories. Based upon today's text, Paul did.

"I thank God every time I remember you," Paul wrote to the believers in Philippi. What a tender way to let people know what they mean to you.

I am confident these were some of the most sincere and heart-felt words Paul ever wrote. This is how special the bond between him and the Christians in Philippi was.

Who were these friends that Paul loved so dearly? These were the people who welcomed him with open arms when he traveled through Philippi on his second missionary journey.

Under Lydia's leadership, they listened to Paul share the gospel, put their faith in Christ and helped him to begin a new church in their city. Paul enjoyed every minute he was able to stay with them and work alongside them.

It broke his heart when he had to leave them. However, staying in Philippi became too dangerous for him and Silas, so they had to move along.

It seems Paul upset the political and economic power structure in Philippi by preaching the gospel and modeling the Golden Rule. After rescuing a young girl who was being exploited by some community leaders, Paul and Silas were arrested, beaten and thrown in jail.

After his release from jail, Paul went to Lydia's house to tell her and his new friends that he must leave Philippi. I suspect he wondered if he would ever see or hear from them again.

That question did not take long to answer. Not only would he hear from them again, he would hear from them often.

For the next ten years, Lydia and the other believers stayed in touch with Paul, sending him encouraging notes and financial support. They even made it possible for Epaphroditus to travel with Paul to assist him with his work.

I believe you understand why the good people at Philippi were some of Paul's dearest friends. Their kindness, generosity and loyalty overwhelmed Paul and created this special bond between them.

"I thank my God every time I remember you," Paul wrote from a prison cell somewhere in Rome. Perhaps his time with these faithful supporters was the closest thing to heaven he could imagine.

"I thank my God every time I remember you."

Two thoughts crossed mind last week as I focused on these words that would certainly be appropriate inside modern day Hallmark Thanksgiving cards. Let me share them with you.

We need to let people know how they have touched and changed our lives. If love is not love until it is shared, then gratitude is not gratitude until it is expressed.

Whose spirit would be lifted by hearing you say thank you? Whose doubts of their significance and impact on others would be laid to rest by getting a note from you?

Whose efforts to make the world around them better would be recognized by your words of affirmation? Whose sacrifices on your behalf could be used to inspire others to a life of service if you told their story?

Is it a family member, a friend, a teacher, a coach, a minister, a Sunday school teacher, a mentor or a neighbor? What did they do for you?

Did they believe in you when you were struggling with low self-esteem?

Did they listen to you when you were upset?

Did they give you advice when you were confused?

Did they caress your brow when you were sick?

Did they hold you when your world came crashing down?

Did they encourage you when your dreams did not materialize?

Did they feed you when you were hungry?

Did they vouch for you when others were skeptical?

Did they tell your story and advocate for you when no one would listen to you?

Did they walk with you down unfamiliar roads?

Did they give you a job?

Did they provide a scholarship for you to go to college?

Did they write you when you were in the military?

Did they teach you how to read or develop a skill or handle money or lead others?

Did they show you how to handle problems, troubles, trials, temptations and challenges?

Did they come looking for you when you had lost your way?

Did they tell you about Jesus?

Did they give you a clearer image of God?

Did they make hope visible?

Don't forget these people, and don't forget to tell them the difference they have made in your life. If they are no longer here, tell their story to someone who is.

Gratitude will not let us forget the people who shaped and molded our lives. It will certainly not let us forget the people who saved our lives.

If Paul felt it necessary to write to the Philippians to tell them what they meant to him, how much more do we need to tell people what is in our hearts. Follow Paul's example.

"I thank God every time I remember you." Paul wrote.

There is another way these words of gratitude penned by Paul to the Philippians speak to me. **We need to be the kind of people others want to remember.**

Our presence or the mention of our name needs to warm the hearts of those around us and bring smiles to their faces. The very thought of Lydia and the believers in Philippi did this for Paul. "I thank God every time I remember you," Paul wanted them to know.

What was it about them that made such an impression upon Paul and endeared them to him? I have to believe they were good people who had big hearts, open minds and generous spirits.

I suspect they were honest, trustworthy, reliable, fair, humble, compassionate, courageous, unselfish, generous, loyal and hospitable. They had to recognize the sacrifices Paul was making on their behalf and vowed to support him wherever he went so he could do for others what he had done for them.

No wonder Paul loved these dear friends and had to let them know the very thought of them stirred his heart and motivated him to keep on keeping on with the work God had given him to do.

"I thank my God every time I remember you."

Do you think someone feels this way about you? We all want to think so, don't we?

Let me stress something to you this morning as we reflect upon Paul's relationship with the believers in Philippi. A person doesn't have to be perfect or meet all the expectations others have of him or her to be loved and appreciated. If this were true, none of us would endear ourselves to anyone.

People are drawn to people who are authentic, genuine and know what it is like to live in a world filled with intimidating challenges and overwhelming struggles.

They are drawn to people who treat them with dignity, respect and kindness.

They are drawn to people who love them at their best and their worst.

They are drawn to people who listen without judging and offer encouragement when they are struggling.

They are drawn to people who catch them when they fall and forgive them when they mess up.

They are drawn to people who believe in them when others don't and walk alongside them when others have abandoned them.

They are drawn to people who offer a hopeful vision of life and encourage them to chase their dreams.

They are drawn to people who tell them the truth and hold them accountable for the changes they need to make or the goals they have set.

They are drawn to people who make hope visible and are good role models.

With God's help, I believe every one of us can be this kind of person.

Will you ask God to help you?