

“Paul’s Hallmark Thanksgiving Card”

Philippians 1:3-8

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

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This morning our attention is drawn to the most personal letter Paul wrote. It was written to his friends at Philippi with whom Paul had a long and happy relationship.

Perhaps there is no more appropriate book to turn to on this Sunday before Thanksgiving than Philippians. The opening verses read like a Hallmark card which Paul sent to his most faithful supporters expressing his profound gratitude for their friendship. Let’s open that card and read what’s inside.

“I thank my God every time I remember you,” Paul writes. “In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

It is right for me to feel this way about you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus,” Philippians 1:3-8.

Who were these friends Paul loved so dearly? They were people who welcomed him with open arms when he traveled through Philippi on his second missionary journey. Under Lydia’s leadership, they embraced Paul and his mission, and they helped him to begin a new ministry point in their community.

Paul was not in Philippi long. He had to leave abruptly after being arrested, beaten and jailed because he upset some of the local citizens when he healed a young slave girl. Evidently, she was emotionally disturbed and was being used by her owners as a fortune teller. After she was healed, her ability to make these men money was gone, and they took their anger out on Paul.

What amazed Paul so much about Lydia, her family and friends in Philippi was their support of him and loyalty to him. For the next ten years, they kept in touch with Paul through messengers and sent him encouraging notes and financial support.

Their generosity and kindness overwhelmed Paul. He never forgot them and considered them his closest friends in ministry. The bond between them was immeasurable and unbreakable.

While imprisoned in Rome in 62AD, Paul wrote this letter to his friends in Philippi whom he met ten years earlier. Though he had many things to say to them, he began by expressing his deepest appreciation for their friendship and support.

What do you think Paul wants us to take from this passage as we prepare to observe Thanksgiving this week? I gave this a great amount of thought last week and believe it could be this.

Some of the best days to count our blessings are during the toughest times of our lives. As I mentioned previously, Paul did not pen these words while sitting on a beach overlooking the beautiful Mediterranean Sea. They were written while he was a prisoner in Rome.

This was just one of many trials Paul faced during his public ministry. He was no stranger to hunger, pain and loneliness. He almost perished in a shipwreck, and on more than one occasion he was beaten and left to die. He knew what it was like to be blamed and punished unjustly, and to be forsaken by friends he thought he could count on to help him.

However, to read this letter to the Philippians you would never know any of these things happened to Paul. There is no hint of despair or pity in it. Instead, it is filled with the deepest level of affection and admiration for the friends at Philippi who stayed in touch with him and stood by him for over ten years.

How good are you at counting your blessings when life is not going the way you planned? I suspect most of us struggle to do it. Too often we become angry, bitter, cynical, envious and vindictive.

This is why it is so important to follow Paul's example. Counting our blessings will lift our spirits and bring the best out in us. It will reveal where God is working on our behalf and remind us we are not alone on our journey of faith.

I don't think I have ever experienced a situation in life which was completely devoid of anything good. The Light of the World who is always at our side will never let it get this dark.

Less than a month after the Stock Market crashed in 1929, ministers in a northeastern village gathered to plan the annual Thanksgiving service. Things were about as bad as they had ever been, with no relief in sight. Bread lines were already forming as the effects of the Great Depression spread across the country.

The ministers wondered if it was appropriate to have a Thanksgiving service that year in light of all the anxiety and suffering. If it was, they were of the opinion it would be better to downplay the Thanksgiving theme and focus upon appealing to God for the necessities of life.

Dr. William Stiger spoke up at the meeting to offer an alternative view. He reminded his fellow ministers the Pilgrims celebrated the first Thanksgiving in the midst of great hardship and devastating losses. This was because they were most thankful for someone, not something, and that someone was the God who was always by their side guiding and empowering them.

At all times and in every circumstance, we can find silver linings around our clouds. When we do, we need to thank God for them and express our deepest gratitude to those who reach out to us in ways we never expected. This is what Paul did, and it is what we need to do, also.

Some of the people you need to thank this week might be sitting around your Thanksgiving table. Take a moment to tell them the difference they have made in your life and let them know how grateful you are for their support.

I think there is something else Paul wants us to take away from the opening words of his book to the Philippians. **Be the kind of person who brings a smile to people's faces when they think of you.**

"I thank my God every time I remember you," Paul wrote to his friends in Philippi. How many people say that about you and me?

Why do you think Paul was so grateful for his friends in Philippi? Perhaps it was because they believed in him and supported his work with their prayers, words of encouragement and generous gifts. They even sent one of their own, Epaphroditus, to stay with Paul in Rome to help with Paul's personal needs.

These dear people left no stone unturned when it came to finding ways to help Paul, and Paul never forgot it. The mention of their names moved him to tears and inspired him to remain faithful in the midst of great challenges and struggles.

Marie Tippit feels the same way about Jackie Kennedy. Mrs. Tippit became a widow the same day Jackie Kennedy did. Forty-five minutes after Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated President Kennedy, he shot and killed Dallas police officer J. D. Tippit. Both men were buried on the same day, November 25, 1963.

Marie Tippit was thirty-five years old when her husband was killed that tragic day in Dallas, and she was left with three children to take care of on her own. She was heartbroken

and worried. Since her husband's death was overshadowed by the President's, it was hard for her to say much about her personal grief and anxiety.

A little over a week after her husband's death, Mrs. Tippit received a hand written note from Mrs. Kennedy. She could hardly believe Mrs. Kennedy even knew who she was and what she was feeling.

"What can I say to you," Mrs. Kennedy wrote, "my husband's death is responsible for you losing your husband. Wasn't one life enough to take on that day?"

What Mrs. Kennedy wrote next inspired and encouraged Mrs. Tippit more than words can express. "I lit a flame for Jack at Arlington that will burn forever. I consider that it burns for your husband, too, and so will everyone who ever sees it."

Who needs your support at this time in their life? What would a word of encouragement or a letter of support mean to them? How would a compliment or a financial gift lift their spirits? What difference would a phone call or a visit make in their lives?

The same things which endeared the Philippians to Paul will endear us to those we know: humility, compassion, generosity, loyalty and encouragement. Are you this kind of a family member or friend? Are your relationships characterized by these traits?

Take some time this week to examine your heart and your priorities. Ask the Lord to show you what you could do better, and ask Him to help you make these changes.

With God's help, you can become the kind of person who brings a smile to people's faces when they remember you. I have to believe it will warm your heart, too.