

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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November 26, 2017
12th Sunday in Called to Life
Philippians 1:1-11; Jeremiah 29:1, 4-11

Called to the Community of Faith

This is a sermon about how wonderful it is to be part of a church.

Now I know there are reasons that people have for not being part of a church or other community of faith. Perhaps they have rejected the idea of God, or any great mystery as the source of all that is and will be. Perhaps they have concluded that they can be a good person without a church telling them what they should or shouldn't do. Maybe they have walked away from religious affiliation because their experience tells them that churches are narrow-minded, outdated, and homophobic. Or, maybe they walked away from a particular church concluding that it was just a voice of liberalism, conforming to the culture. Maybe they are offended by the hypocrisy and judgmentalism they see in churches. Often, in this part of the world, people will say they feel closer to God outdoors, or that they are spiritual, but not religious, or that they stopped participating because the church just wasn't meeting their needs.

You've heard all these, too. And there's some truth in most of the reasons people give. But despite the truth we might recognize, we still congregate, we still commit, or at least we still stay connected to this crazy community of faith idea. I believe that's because we are called to a community of faith, a gathering of diverse people around a spiritual life that is older, wiser, and truer than the life we might design for ourselves as individuals. For us as Christians, that gathering is around Jesus Christ. Despite the dominant influence of individualism which motivates our culture, despite the encouragement to see ourselves as autonomous builders of our own lives, despite the encumbrance of a collective which will call out our bad behavior and seek to influence our daily living and even instruct us in our choices, we are drawn to the Christian family. We are called to be in community around Christ, "not as a group of individuals who happened to have responded to the gospel, but as the community of God's people whose corporate life is an essential expression of their divine calling." (*New Interpreter's Bible*, 2002, Abingdon Press, Nashville, vol. XI, p. 482) We are called into the fallible, hypocritical, boring, old-fashioned, time-consuming, and often annoying church. And that's a wonderful gift.

For together, we are a hospital for sinners, and a garden for saints to grow in. We are a struggling human institution, and an earthly home for the divine. We are a collection of needy souls, and a school where love is taught and learned and lived.

Our tendency to individualism can influence the way we hear and read scriptures. Two weeks ago, Rabbi Ed Stafman reminded us that almost always in the Bible, when God speaks, it is to the community of faith, the collective people of God. So it is with today's reading from the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived in the bleakest of historical moments, when the people of Israel were displaced from their land and carried off to live in exile in Babylon. The prophet's words were addressed to the people, and they were words of hope, words assuring them that God had not forgotten them. "I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." In English, we can't tell that the word "you" is plural. In Hebrew, it's very clear. This is a promise to the community of faith, not to an individual. The members of the community are enumerated in the preface to the letter: the elders, the priests, the prophets, and all the people taken into exile.

Similarly, in the New Testament, there is much more literature addressed to communities than there is to individuals. The Romans, the Corinthians, the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians,

Thessalonians, and the Hebrews—you get the idea. One of the gifts of the Protestant Reformation was the rediscovery that in Jesus Christ, we are invited into a personal relationship with God, to be Christ's disciples. This insight functions as a corrective when a church fails to recognize the individual—but like steering away from a skid, sometimes we overcorrect. Sometimes we emphasize the personal decision and forget the importance of the community which nurtures both the decision and one's growth in discipleship.

We are called into the church, and we are called as a church. At the beginning of several of Paul's letters to the churches, after clarifying that this is a letter to "the saints in Christ Jesus"—that is, to the community of faith gathered around Christ—he tells them of his love and gratitude for them. Paul's relationship with the Philippians is the most explicitly loving and thankful of any of his relationships with churches. "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now." The backstory to this is that it was in Philippi that Paul and his companion Silas met Lydia and some other women who went down to the river to pray. Lydia and her people opened their hearts to hear about Jesus Christ, and were baptized together. Thus began the first community of faith gathered around Jesus Christ in Europe. (Acts 16:11-15) Paul's closeness to this community is palpable. He speaks of his joy, his gratitude, his confidence, his affection, and his longing for them. And all this while he is in prison!

For he knows that God is at work in their midst. He knows they are holding him in their collective heart. He knows the bond of grace is keeping them as one, blest be the tie that binds. He knows they are partners in the gospel, partners in faith, in hope, and in love. So even as they uphold him in prayer while he is imprisoned, he lifts them up in prayer that their love may overflow more and more, that despite hardship and even persecution, they might continue on the path he started with them when they first prayed together down by the river.

We know this from Paul's letter, that the Philippian congregation has a particular gift combining love, joy, and generosity. They are called as a Christian community to use this communal gift. And they answer the call in their relationships with one another, with the community around them, and with Paul.

Wouldn't we all love to be part of such authentic, strong Christian community? For all our individualism, we are hungry for true connection with others in a caring, Spirit-filled community. For all our technologically-connected, socially-mediated times, we still long to be deeply present with and for one another. For all our distracted, busy, divided living, we still desperately need the fullness of God to fill our souls!

C.S. Lewis, author of *Mere Christianity*, the Narnia series, and numerous other books, came to faith out of a skeptical academic life. At first, he writes, he disliked the "fussy, time-wasting botheration" of church-going. But he came to realize that the common life of Christians is not optional, writing, "God only reveals himself to real people. . . united together in a body, loving one another, helping one another, showing [God] to one another. . . . The one really adequate instrument for learning about God is the whole Christian community." (quoted by Deborah Smith Douglas, "Staying Present Together: Rooted and Grounded in Love," *Weavings*, vol xxviii, no. 1, p. 14)

For at its best, the church really is a school for love. At its best, the church does more than just teach about love, it models and practices and invites and demonstrates what love is in the world. At its best, in this school we really do love one another, just as Christ commanded, we share in the gospel,

and our love overflows more and more with knowledge and full insight so that, like the Philippians, we produce the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory of God.

We know all the reasons people give for living outside a community of faith. I encourage us to reflect on, and talk about, why we each choose to answer the call to live inside a community of faith, the church. Last week, Presby Cat Sara Mo Vanacht defined a call as how we honor God with our lives. I know that I couldn't do that very well without the church.

So here are some of my reasons. I would love to hear yours.

I love the church because here I come to know Jesus Christ, my Savior and Lord. I love the church because the church raised me to recognize that in goodness and truth, God is present. I love the church because it gives me the ground on which to stand when making moral and ethical choices. I love the church because in the church I have experienced forgiveness, and learned to be forgiving. I love the church for its beauty—its music, art and architecture which lift me towards God. I love the church because it is local, like a family, so in it there is plenty of opportunity to practice virtues of patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and even self-control. I love the church because it is global, and through the church I have made friends from all over the world. Just think of Wiseman from Mozambique and Clever from Peru who worshiped with us this fall, brothers in faith who expanded our world view and our opportunity to love neighbors.

I love the church because the church's love has wrapped around me when I was broken, when I was grieving, when I was sick, and when I was lonely. I love the church because it gives me the chance to gather with others around those who are falling apart, the opportunity to care for the poor and needy, and the call to serve as Jesus showed us how. I love the church because its word is not stagnant, its message is always needed, and its witness is always relevant to the crises of the day. I love the church because of its treasury of wisdom, its communion of saints, and its legacy of love. I know its foibles, its faults, and its shame, and I still love the church.

So on this Thanksgiving weekend, I echo Paul as I say to us, we who are a local manifestation of the church, the community of faith gathered around Jesus Christ,

"I thank my God every time I remember you, . . . confident that the One who began a good work in you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

Thanks be to God.