

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our risen Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Each of Paul's letters in the New Testament were written to specific people or communities. So, they give us a snapshot of what life was like for the early Christians.

The one we read today, to the Philippians, shows us the deep gratitude Paul had for their work and their commitment to the gospel.

What he describes in these verses is a partnership in the gospel that's embodied as faith active in love. It's faith lived in response to God's love, God's relationship with humanity that Jesus made visible.

The Christian community in Philippi didn't just gather to worship God, or to praise Jesus. They lived their faith outside of the worship setting, which we would expect, but they were in a city that was heavily pro-Rome.

Their values and way of living would have made them stand out. So, their relationship with Paul was no small thing.

Remembering Paul's history with people who followed the Way of Jesus, he had to work to gain people's trust. ¹And, as Paul writes, the community in Philippi was there from the beginning. They supported Paul when trust in his transformation was risky.

And as they built that relationship, they became partners with Paul in the Gospel. It wasn't just a relationship where they checked in with each other from time to time, or said words of encouragement.

This was a relationship of deep commitment. The Philippians gave Paul the resources necessary for his work. They invested materially in his ministry. They stuck with him, even as Paul was imprisoned more than once for sharing the gospel – which is where he was when he wrote this particular letter.

And Paul lifted up their work in a way that helped them celebrate their part in it *and* kept them moving forward in their partnership and the work in the gospel.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/partnership-in-the-gospel-2/commentary-on-philippians-11-18a-4>

What the Philippians embodied was the understanding that committing to be partners in the gospel means committing to the relationships that are built in that partnership. More to the point, it's committing to *building relationships* in that partnership.

Because they recognized they could go through the motions of saying and doing all the right things when it came to living their faith in Jesus, but without their relationships with one another, it would have been much more difficult both for them and for Paul.

Because holding each other at arms' length, doesn't embody the gospel. But building relationships with each other in the partnership of the gospel *embodies* the commitment Jesus made to humanity. In their life together and in their ministry, the Philippians lived in response to that.

It's the same commitment we seek to live in response to. The commitment Jesus made to us. A relationship that teaches us what it means to be partners in the gospel because it's a relationship rooted in God's love.

When I began serving in Phoenix, there was a row of shops across the road from the church. And a couple of years after I started there, a man named Tony showed up before worship one Sunday morning and asked if he could have a cup of coffee.

Even though there was no programming that early, we always made it a point to have some coffee ready before the service. And at first, Tony would just get the coffee and leave, walking across the street to the shops. He didn't stay and talk. Not at first.

But after a while, he stayed and chatted with people from the congregation, but left when they came over to the sanctuary for worship. He didn't come in for the services. And yes, they did invite him.

After some more time passed, he *did* stay for the services, and then for fellowship afterward. And we learned part of his story.

He was a military veteran. Homeless and sleeping in the doorways of the shops across the road. The shop owners let him stay there because he helped keep an eye on the place at night and chased off any troublemakers.

And we learned that he had been doing the same for us. The way the church campus is laid out, there are a lot of protected spaces for people to sleep. And before Tony came along, our caretaker would roust the sleepers every morning and tell them it was

time to get up and leave. Tony took on that role for a time, *and also* walked through the campus in the middle of the night and chased off any troublemakers.

He became a member of the congregation and participated in life there as he could.

After he'd been with us for a couple of years, we learned that he'd been convicted of a crime and sentenced to a year or something in prison and would be going away to serve that time. He never told us what the charges were. When I asked him, all he said was, "Pastor, I ain't no saint, but I'm not as guilty as they say I am." And he left it at that.

We wrote letters to him during that year – and he wrote back. And when he got out, he began the process of getting help from the VA. At that time, the VA in Phoenix was in the national news because it was mired in significant administrative issues.

So, Tony eventually ended up moving to Las Vegas, because the VA there was able to get him the help he needed. We were able to keep in touch with him for quite a while after that, but we lost contact after a time.

When we talk about being partners in the Gospel, it's about more than just worship or doing stuff with and for others. Being partners in the gospel means we commit to the relationships we build in that partnership.

Specifically, we commit to *building relationships* in that partnership. And we know that building relationships takes time. It takes patience. Sometimes there's even an element of risk because we don't know how it's going to go.

With the early Christians in Philippi, it was taking the risk to trust Paul after his conversion.

With Tony in Phoenix, it was taking the risk to ask for that first cup of coffee. It was the congregation members taking the risk of welcoming him into the building.

In each of those situations, it was recognizing that, as Christians, we commit to the relationships. And we do it because Jesus committed to us. And our response to *his* commitment starts with welcoming people in.

We're really good at talking to people we already know. Many of you in here and online have been coming here and have known each other for decades. You come in and greet each other. And it's beautiful.

But the risk is ending up with blinders on, and not paying attention to the other people around you, and forgetting that relationships aren't limited to the people you know.

So, those of you who have been here for decades – or at least for a couple of years – as you look around the room, who don't you know? Who's sitting behind you? Who haven't you met yet?

Walking into a church community for the first time, especially a worship service, is one of the bravest things a person can do. Because it seems like everyone already knows each other and what's going on. And you don't want to do anything to make yourself stand out.

And when people who've been here long enough notice someone new in church, we often think, "Oh, someone else will introduce themselves. Someone else will answer their questions. Someone else will make sure they know what's going on."

But each of you that has been here long enough is the "someone else." That's how partnerships work. Especially partnerships in the gospel.

It's how relationships are built. Because we can be surface-level polite and kind and nice. And that's a good start. But ministry happens and the gospel is shared through our relationships with one another.

Not just with the people we know well, but with anyone who seeks to be in partnership with us in the gospel. That's the commitment we make as Christians.

And we make it in response to the commitment Jesus made to us. The commitment rooted in God's relationship to humanity and the whole created order. A relationship that teaches us how to live, how to be partners in the gospel, because it's a relationship rooted in God's love for the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.