

April 22, 2018
Final sermon at Fellowship
Philippians 1:1-11

To The Saints at Fellowship

Before I could be ordained and installed as the pastor here at Fellowship, I had to be examined on the floor of the Presbytery. I mean first I had to go through lot of rigorous education, training, written ordination exams and a whole lot else. Preaching at a Presbytery meeting and being examined afterwards is the final step in the ordination process of our denomination. Many of you were there for that meeting because the Pastor Nominating Committee had already extended a call to me, I had joyfully accepted, and this congregation had voted its approval.

Anyway, one of the questions I was asked was to name my favorite New Testament and Old Testament passages. Keep in mind, this was an emotionally intense time for me and you know how I get when I'm emotional. I didn't cry though thank goodness. I did think to myself, well that is weird. I mean you don't really have favorite Bible passages. That is like asking a parent who is your favorite child. Or asking a pastor who is your favorite parishioner. They're all different of course, but you love them all equally right? I didn't say that though, I said for the New Testament, it's the commissioning passage that closes the Gospel of Matthew: **Matthew 28:18-20 Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."** For the Old Testament passage I said Psalm 23. And my favorite setting of the Psalm is the version we just heard especially when it's sung by our choir. I think Matt remembered that. It's one of those God things that it happens to be the Lectionary Psalm for this Sunday. I love Psalm 23 and the commissioning passage

so much because they are succinct and unambiguous statements of God's constant, everlasting and unconditional love. They are words of great comfort in times of trouble or sorrow.

By the way, a couple of years ago at a meeting of pastors and Christian educators, we were asked to go around the table and name our favorite Book of the Bible as sort of an ice breaker exercise. Christy Williams, who is the queen of ice breakers, and as many of you know, does not mince words, ever, said no, I'm not answering that. You can't have a favorite Book of the Bible, just no, I'm not doing it. That never occurred to me as an option when I was being examined by the Presbytery.

I do love the entire Bible, of course and I have many favorites, but since I became a Pastor, the opening verses of Paul's letter to the Philippians has been one that I keep close to my heart and remember daily. Paul is writing to a church he started in Philippi, some years earlier. This is one of the churches founded by Paul with a woman as their original pastor and financial contributor. So, don't let anyone tell you that Paul said women cannot be pastors. Don't worry—I'm not going off on that subject. Listen to the word of God.

You know, in most of Paul's letters there are underlying currents that he is worried about—the church is struggling with conflict or crisis. Both letters to the Corinthians clearly are intended to mediate a church that is deeply divided. They're arguing over everything from what color carpet to put in the Sunday school rooms, to the pros and cons of contemporary worship. The letter to the Romans is just trying to hold a fledgling church together in the face of oppression and persecution.

But this letter to the Philippians seems to be exactly what it appears to be. A letter written by the former pastor to a dearly beloved congregation that is thriving.

He thanks God for them every day, remembers them in his prayers constantly, his memories of them are all joyful. That doesn't mean there were no

disagreements or controversies in the congregation. We hear a little of that in the letter also. It is clear that from the earliest days of the church there were legitimate debates and collective questioning about how exactly they were to be the church. Jesus didn't leave us a Book of Order or an instruction manual. It all had to be worked out. It continues to have to be worked out.

Fellowship has had more than its share of issues that had to be worked out. When I started here you had been through an extended period of rocky times. But you didn't give up. You didn't quit because you didn't get your way. In the last 10 years, there have been many of the day to day issues where there is room for disagreement and I have witnessed our session and the congregation work through them with mutual respect and grace. No one quit the church because they didn't like one or the other style of music. No one quit the church because we serve communion by intinction. There are other examples.

There has been one major issue that rocked our denomination over the last 10 years. When the PCUSA finally came down on the side of marriage equality, we did lose some members who disagreed with that decision. But it was actually a smaller number than most similarly situated churches lost. And I know some of you were and are unhappy with the denomination's decision. But you didn't leave your church home because of it and for that I am grateful. I am also grateful to those of you who kept open minds and hearts and reconciled your concerns. And I am most proud of the unwavering commitment to those of you who felt very strongly about the issue and stood by your commitment to this church when the denomination was resisting change. I don't deserve to take pride in all of you—you all deserve to take pride in yourselves—but I am proud of Fellowship and I firmly believe that we came out of it a stronger and more committed congregation.

I will ask you one thing when you reminisce about our time together. If you ever hear anyone suggest that I retired because I was disappointed that we lost

members over the decisions of the denomination, don't let it slide. I want you all to be firm and clear. I was disappointed that a handful of individuals' personal self-righteousness prevented them from feeling and reflecting Christ's love towards all God's children, and abandoned their own church family as a result. But I was never disappointed in this congregation. I was proud of it and I always will be.

Over the last few weeks I have commented and many of you have observed that my retirement is a bitter sweet moment. But know this. It is 99% sweet. I have never known such love as I have felt poured out on me by you. The only element of so-called bitterness is that I am not going to be your pastor. It is who I am and it's not easy to think about not being that person any more.

You are the saints in Christ Jesus Paul writes about. Please do not underestimate how important your active participation in the life of this church is to your own spiritual health, and to the continued ministries of this church. I will always remember you with joy and pray for you constantly.

I would like to close with a slightly modified excerpt of this passage from the Message (some of you Biblical scholars like Bill Lee, Bill Donalson, Anne Hall, Jeannie, Doc, Mary Kelsay, and others, will understand that this is an adaptation of an interpretation):

I find myself praying for you with a glad heart. I am so pleased that you have continued on in the ministry of Fellowship Presbyterian Church, believing and proclaiming God's Message, each of you from the time you became part of this congregation to the present. There has never been the slightest doubt in my mind that the God who started this great work in you would keep at it and bring it to fruition. Believe me, I'm not kidding myself to think this way about you. My prayers and hopes have deep roots in reality. You have, after all, stuck with me all the way from the time I joined you. All along we have experienced together the

most generous help from God. He knows how much I love and will miss you. Sometimes I think I feel as strong a love for you as Christ does!

So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but love well. Learn to love appropriately and practically. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere, intelligent and translates into action—not just sentimental gush. Live a lover’s life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God.

And get up and come to worship every Sunday. Amen.