

Text: Philippians 1: 1-14
Title: With Deep Affection
Date: 05.06.18
Roger Allen Nelson

My mom died on Thanksgiving morning. There was no warning; there had been no downsizing. Her life, captured in photos and china and furniture, was just as she left it. As if she was coming back later that afternoon. As if she would walk through the door and pick up exactly where she left off....

These left few months have meant sorting through the artifacts of her life trying to determine what should be kept and what should be passed on. We found boxes of letters and a surprising collection of cheap jewelry. We found clutter and we found treasure. In a jewelry box we found a simple brooch that my father gave my mother. Underneath that brooch ~ folded up, tucked away, written in fountain pen, and probably sixty years old ~ was the letter that my father wrote in giving the brooch. It was beautiful, romantic, theological, thoughtful, intimate, and somehow holy. With pen to paper my father declared his deepest affections and longings. This was real treasure....

The Bible is, in part, a box full of letters. And our text this morning is first and foremost a letter. It declares Paul's affections, hopes, fears and deepest longings. It's personal ~ the language is warm, earnest, and from the heart. It's written by a friend and sent to friends.

Paul probably understood that his letter would be read aloud in an open forum ~ at a house church, around a table, or by a fire. But, there is clearly no indication that Paul had any idea he was writing a letter that would be read two thousand years later. And yet, this morning we've shuffled through a box full of letters and we're reading, over the Philippians' shoulder as it were, a love letter from Paul.

Maybe that is a good place to start.
This letter is written with a deep affection.

The story recorded in Acts is that Paul traveled to Philippi because of a vision. And after they were there several days Paul and his companions went down to the river to pray ~ there weren't many Jews in Philippi and there probably wasn't a temple. At the river they found a gathering of women and during their exchange one of the women, Lydia, a fabric merchant, asked to be baptized and invited Paul and friends into her house. And, the first church is planted in Europe.

Now. What is remarkable here is how far Paul has come...

From a militant-rule-keeping-God-fearing-Pharisee to planting a church whose first member is a Gentile business woman ~ the gospel stretched Paul from being a Jewish purist to planting a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural church community with roots in a diversity of faiths. There is evidence that the church at Philippi was populated with former slaves, the city jailer, the rich and the poor, Gentiles, Jews, male, female, the powerful and powerless.

And, Paul loved this community.
Listen to his language about them in these opening few verses:

*I thank my God every time I remember you...
I always pray with joy because of your partnership...
I have you in my heart...
All of you share in God's grace with me....
I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus...*

Those whom Paul once would have seen as unclean outsiders were now embraced with a deep affection.

Bishop Carlton Pearson was a fourth-generation Pentecostal preacher. He founded a mega-church in Tulsa, Oklahoma and was the hand-picked successor of Oral Roberts. With a beautiful wife, a flashy smile, a smooth voice, and an enormous ego he was a bright star in a consolation of charismatic preachers.

But, while watching a documentary with his children about the suffering of refugees in Rwanda, Bishop Carlton began to rethink the existence of hell and re-imagine the reach of God's love. He describes it as an epiphany. He says he heard the voice of God. And, in turn, he began to preach about a kind of universal reconciliation that he calls "a gospel of inclusion." He began to proclaim that hell existed on Calvary and in peoples' lives, but that it was not an eternal destination.

Preach that and there's hell to pay. Pearson's big flock deserted him, he was disowned by Oral Roberts, the college of bishops labeled him a heretic, and the bank foreclosed on his church. He was busted, broke, beat down and then diagnosed with cancer....

But, then he was invited to preach at a small church in San Francisco ~ a church of AIDs patients and abused women with a lesbian pastor. When he was done preaching the pastor invited him to sit down and take off his shoes; then she knelt before him and washed his feet. The congregation was singing and weeping. And, Bishop Pearson describes it as a holy moment where he was healed by God through outcast angels....

In his words:

God used the most marginalized, discriminated people in modern culture to embrace me at my lowest, loneliest ebb. You can't teach what you don't know and you can't lead where you don't go. My life and ministry will never be the same.

I offer that story not because of Pearson's theological position, but because of how far he moved. He went from the heights of Pentecostal fundamentalism to the fringes of the church. He went from being a powerful insider to being served by the quintessential outsiders.

The gospel moved Paul a similar distance.

He went from being a powerful insider to planting a church of outsiders.

He went from the courts of Jerusalem to the edges of the empire and there he met a people that loved him, took him, supported and encouraged him. And when he was in dire straits, sustained him.

So, the first thing that he writes to them is laced with a deep affection. And, the word translated here as affection is that wonderful Greek word for compassion or bowels. Paul longs for them with, or from, the very guts of Jesus Christ.

Why is this important?

Try this on for size....

The gospel is essentially about right relationships. While we think about it as righting the relationship between God and humanity, it is never done in a vacuum. It is always done in relation to others.

There are no lone rangers.

There is little biblical support for a private mysticism.

There is no mention in the Bible of a personal relationship with God.

There are only families, friends, generations, others.

There is a web of mutual affection that Paul calls *koinonia*.

Koinonia is a supple slippery word that gets translated in all sorts of ways. In the New Testament it shows up as “fellowship,” “sharing,” “communion,” “participation,” “contribution,” and a version of it, in verse 7 of this morning’s text, gets translated as:

all of you share in God’s grace with me...

Koinonia is the sharing of life, meals, and possessions in the early church.

Koinonia is sharing in the life, death and resurrection of Christ in the Eucharist.

Koinonia is a vital-life-giving participation with others.

Koinonia is living with a deep affection.

And for Paul, *koinonia* is predicated on the love of Christ.

The affection that Paul knows is not simply because he liked people in Philippi. It is not about friendship or airy-fairy feelings. Rather, Paul writes out of *koinonia* because the Philippians were loved by God through Christ.

Paul loves them because Christ loves them.

Paul welcomes them as partners because Christ welcomes them as partners.

Paul writes with a deep affection because Christ loves them with a deep affection.

I was asked to be part of a gathering of denominational mucky-mucks who are thinking about church renewal. As the Christian Reformed Church of North America and the Reformed Church in America both experience decline they are praying and scrambling and trying to figure out how to stem the tide and be revived. We were asked to draw pictures of what church renewal would look like and then share our pictures in small groups. It was not my best day ever....

But with this text in my head, I kept coming back to this:

Worship styles, music, preaching, liturgy, language, theology, etcetera ~ are all expressions of culture. Each congregation is a micro-culture. And, different people are attracted to different things. I am thankful that there are all sorts of churches for all sorts of people. But....

But the common longing is for *koinonia*. The common longing is for some deep affection. I have friends who are free range spiritual chickens but they long for community. I have friends who are fundamentalist Bible thumpers and they long for community. *Koinonia* is somehow thicker than blood, background, class, common interest, or culture.

Hope Church is a wonderful little church community.

There are relationships forged over the fires of joy and heartbreak. There are friends who have stood beside one another at baptisms and at funerals. There are new tender shoots being planted and there are roots that reach deep. There is an affection that supersedes the coming and going of preachers. Beautiful little Payton Johanna has the opportunity to grow up in the same community that loved and nurtured her great grandmother, grandmother, and mother. Thanks be to God.

But, let us not be too confident or comfortable. The future of the church ~ denominations and local congregations ~ swings on connecting, loving, accepting, and sharing the journey with others. The church will rise and fall on how we build *koinonia* with others.

As we are loved by Christ how will we love others?

How far will we be moved to practice a gospel of inclusion?

Who will we love and accept with a deep affection?

How can we push wider the circle of *koinonia*?

I don't have simple answers. I'm not good at programs. My guess is that you know someone that you can welcome and enfold and love ~ without being creepy. Deep affection is a long slow journey, but it is the real treasure....

Therefore, Paul writes:

So, this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not 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.

The Message ~ Eugene Peterson

May that be our common prayer.

May that be in our bowels.

May that move and shape our *koinonia*.

Amen.