

**A HEART FOR GOD:
HAVING VALUES THAT MATTER**

Philippians 1:1-11

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SCRIPTURE

¹Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: ²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God (Philippians 1:1-11 NRSV).

MESSAGE

How was Paul able to keep such a positive and growing relationship with so many congregations – congregations consisting of diverse populations spread out over a large geographical area? I think the answer is found in the opening paragraphs of his Letter to the Philippians. He stresses their partnership in Christ, the trustworthiness of God, and the need to express one's faith through love. He says:

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best (9, 10a).

In other words, if we love God then we will adopt values that matter. And if we have values that matter then we can determine what is the best way to faithfully serve God in our situation. If we have a heart for God we will have values that matter and will be able to determine what is best.

Phillips Brooks' is regarded as one of the greatest preachers of the nineteenth century. Perhaps his most lasting legacy were his Yale lectures on preaching in which he defined preaching as the "communication of truth through personality."

Congregations are not unlike individuals. Each has a unique personality. How the timeless truths of the Gospel are expressed by a church are shaped by the unique characteristics of each

church. Identifying core values is an effective way to identify the personality of a congregation. It is a clear way to express the aspirations of the church. It also helps us, to use Paul's words, "determine what is best." Here at First Presbyterian Church we have delineated seven core values:

GLORIOUS WORSHIP
SPIRIT EMPOWERED PRAYER
LIFE ROOTED IN SCRIPTURE
GRACIOUS WITNESS
COMPASSIONATE SERVICE
ABUNDANT LIFE THROUGH COMMUNITY
EVERY PERSON'S DIGNITY AFFIRMED

1. GLORIOUS WORSHIP

There is a huge difference between coming to worship and showing up for church. Most of us in attendance today show up for church on a more or less regular basis. But how often do we come to worship? Our bodies are here. But where are our hearts?

Jesus said:

But the time is coming—indeed it's here now—when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way (John 4:23 NLT).

God is Spirit and can be worshiped anywhere. The issue is not where you place your feet but where you place your heart. Jesus wants us to open our hearts to God.

We are easily distracted. We think about what happened last night or on the way to church this morning. We think about what we have to do right after church. (I'm often guilty of that!) We think about that gosh awful hymn we had to sing. We think about the misspellings in the bulletin. We think about that stranger who sat in our seat, for heaven's sake! Oh, yes, we showed up for church alright. We just didn't come to worship. Friends, let's not just show up for church. Let's come to worship!

2. SPIRIT EMPOWERED PRAYER

Many people today view prayer the way you would view a parachute if you were a pilot – you're glad it is available but you hope you never have to use it.

But prayer is not meant to be a last ditch effort but a first place priority. Paul frequently requested prayer from others (1 Thess 5:25). And if someone like the Apostle Paul needed prayer then how much more do we. Billy Graham once said there are three things

needed for an effective ministry: prayer, prayer, and prayer!

If prayer isn't a priority in your life right now, why not make it a priority starting today? If your schedule is as busy as you think it is, grab any available time you can find, and make it your prayer time. Why not start the day out right? Make a quality decision to make prayer your first order of business!

3. LIFE ROOTED IN SCRIPTURE

If we want to be a church whose life is rooted in Scripture then before any important decision we must ask ourselves, "Is this faithful to God's will as revealed in Scripture?" But before we can answer that question we need to know what the Scriptures teach and how that teaching applies to our lives.

One national survey showed that the most widely known Bible verse among adult and teen believers is, "God helps those who help themselves." However, this verse is not in the Bible and actually contradicts the basic message of the Gospel.

You need to take time on a regular basis to read Scripture or listen to the reading of Scripture. A good working knowledge of the basic themes of the Bible is important. In addition to knowledge of the Word we also need to have consideration of the Word. You need to consider how a particular passage applies to your life. What is God saying to you? You may or may not like what you hear but you will not come away empty. John Wesley taught that we need to examine ourselves whenever we examine Scripture and show praise if God helped us to live right and humiliation if we have fallen short.

Pray about the passage. Include some of the words and ideas from the passage in your prayer. John White believed that prayer and reading were of mutual benefit and were meant to be joined together.¹ Pray that you will learn from the passage. Pray also that you will be shaped by what you have learned. This way your life will be rooted in the Word.

4. GRACIOUS WITNESS

God commands us and empowers us to be his witnesses (Matt 4:19; Acts 1:8). Sharing with others — sometimes called witnessing since we are witnesses to Christ — is a vital part of the Christian life. The most important part of our witness is how we relate to people. The Bible tells us, "Let your conversation be always full of grace" (Col 4:6 NIV). Gracious behavior generally invites a gracious response.

¹Howard Rice, Reformed Spirituality (Louisville: Westminster, 1991), 117.

In the coming weeks we will be going through a series called, “Just Walk Across the Room,” to help us as a congregation and as individual Christians be a gracious witness to the Good News of Christ.

5. COMPASSIONATE SERVICE

In the Bible the words "service" and "ministry" are translations of the same Greek term. So all of us are called to ministry just as all of us are called to serve. Ministry simply means using what we have to help others in the name of God.

We need to *discover* our service. In order to discover our place of service we need to acknowledge that God has given to each and every believer one or more abilities to be used to build up the church. Paul says:

“Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7 NIV).

Eugene Peterson puts it this way:

“Each person is given something to do that shows who God is.”

We learn our place of service as we use our spiritual gifts and other abilities to strengthen the Church and compassionately carry out the work of Christ in the world.

6. ABUNDANT LIFE THROUGH COMMUNITY

Have you ever seen Neighborhood Watch signs? That's an indication of community. It says we watch out for each other here. We're looking out for each other. My guess is if you did any traveling this past year, you were gone for a week, maybe two weeks, you probably told your neighbor you were going to be gone. You said, "I'm going to be gone for a couple weeks. Would you kind of keep an eye out on my place? Look out for my stuff." We all want our stuff looked out for! That's a good thing to have your stuff looked after, watched out for.

But my question is not, “Is anybody watching out for your stuff.” Rather, “Is anybody watching out for your soul.” Your soul is a whole lot more important than your stuff. Is there anybody in your life who helps you stay on track spiritually? Is there anybody who loves you enough to say, "I'm not going to let you get discouraged. I'm not going to let you drop out. I'm here with you.” We all need people like that. And the best way to have people like that in our lives is to become a person like that for others.

The author of Hebrews tells us:

“Keep being concerned about each other as the Lord's followers should”
(Heb 13:1).

We are to care about each other. We're family. We're in God's family.

We need courage when the world is rough. We need to keep loving even though the world is tough. We need each other for both. We're better together.

7. EVERY PERSON'S DIGNITY AFFIRMED

We officially adopted our Core Values last year after working on it for more than a year, but this was actually prompted by what took place over three years ago. At that time I was deeply troubled by the growing divisions within society and within the Church. I thought about what Paul had said to the Christians in Rome:

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, {6} so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. {7} Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God (Romans 15:5-7 NRSV).

Notice that Paul is not arguing that the Roman Christians must agree on everything in order to have harmony. In the earlier chapters, Paul has been at pains to urge the members of the church to accept each other in spite of their conscientious disagreements on secondary matters. They can accept each other in spite of their differences because Christ has accepted them. Furthermore, this acceptance honors and glorifies God.

This line of thinking eventually produced a famous Christian motto:

In Essentials Unity, In Non-Essentials Liberty, In All Things Love.

It has become the official motto of a number of churches and denominations.² In so far as it accords with the teaching of the New Testament, it would serve us well as a motto for every church and for every denomination today.

At first, we thought we would adopt it as a core value. But then we realized it was something different. Instead of seeing it as a core value, we used it to express our commitment to unity as an approach to ministry. But it did help trigger the identification

² The Moravian Church of North America and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church would be two examples.

of our Core Values, especially: Every Person's Dignity Affirmed.

None of us is a finished project. No church on earth is complete. So there will always be a need in this world for those who are united in Christ to learn how to live in love with one another while dealing with our differences. The historic principle of *Unity, Liberty and Love* is a crucial guide for such efforts. This principle leads us to the following convictions:

- We can affirm the Biblical teaching that all persons are created in the image of God and deserve to have their dignity acknowledged and to be treated with respect.
- We can agree to love our neighbors regardless of our differing beliefs.
- We can endeavor, for the sake of the common good, to live respectfully and civilly alongside those who may disagree with us.
- We can face the future with both humility and confidence. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). We may not know what the future will bring but we know who will bring it. Jesus remains Lord and will continue to lead his Church.