

## GRATITUDE AND HOPE

Psalm 65; Philippians 1:3-11

November 17, 2024

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For someone who never stayed with a faith community longer than a few months, Paul seemed to have established pretty close ties to some of them

*Especially, it seems, to the church in Philippi. I love what he writes about thanking God for them and praying with joy when he thinks about them... "because of their sharing in the gospel from the first day until now."*

I picked that passage because that's how I feel about our twenty-five years here, "a sharing in the gospel." I hear that phrase as somehow in the same spirit as our intention statement: "At Westminster, we live a whole life in response to God, attentively, together, engaging the world for the good of all, following Jesus Christ." We haven't had that statement the whole twenty-five years, but I think it expresses what we've been about that whole time.

*On the surface, I think it sounds very simple, almost simplistic. But it isn't, and I have really appreciated the way those few phrases have both articulated who we are as a congregation and helped us focus our ministry and find our way to living out our identity more fully.*

There's a life-time of learning and living in that statement. We're grateful for your embrace of it.

*There are so many ways this congregation reflects the "sharing in the gospel" that Paul talks about ... and the "together" of our Intention Statement. You never assume that "the ministry" is the work of the pastors alone. You have always seen it as a shared endeavor. We've been especially grateful for the ways you engage one another that move the church forward: the listening you did around LGBTQ issues that resulted in our welcome statement; the shared compassion that led to the warming center; the conversations around worship that created room for grace-filled changes in our service over the years.*

I thank you for your love of learning, for the ways in which you bring your mind to explore the scripture, never settling for the surface meaning of a text, but exploring its various contexts, and bringing your own experience to it; for your interest in a theology that speaks to and reflects the realities of the world in which we live; for a spirituality that connects to your soul; and your thirst for knowledge that brings together science, faith, compassion and justice.

*I particularly am grateful for your embrace of art as a way to engage with scripture and faith and the world. That's something I'm really passionate about and I so enjoy getting to share that with you.*

Thank you also for being willing to do some “outside the box” things – things churches don’t typically do – like hold an Art Festival, for example. And host concerts. Read books and talk about all sorts of issues. Bestow annual peace prize.

*Those activities bring us in contact with different people and different ideas. We are constantly enriched and challenged, both intellectually and spiritually. We’re never bored!*

Thank you also for music that feeds our souls and honors God and expresses more than words alone can say.

*We appreciate how much worship matters to the members of this faith community. And your willingness to listen to our sermons! (even talk with us about them sometimes). During the pandemic, we – and the rest of our live-streaming team as well, I think - were deeply touched by the determination of this congregation to continue to worship together even though it was so different.*

We never cease to be amazed at the care you all have for one another – and for us, too. Countless notes and phone calls that remind people that they are thought of. Prayers lifted up daily for our community’s concerns. Deacons who keep track of our members’ needs, who arrange rides and provide meals and take communion to shut-ins and offer hospitality to grieving families – and on occasion go far beyond expectations to see that someone’s needs are met.

*Even in a week like this past one, when we are hit hard with sorrow – and there is a lot to do – we find that there is so much to be grateful for. We always know that it isn’t just the two of us offering comfort and trying to figure out how to help – we feel your support and prayers, and we get to witness the beauty of a community that weeps with those who weep, as well as rejoicing with those who rejoice.*

Thank you for being a church whose caring extends beyond the walls of the church. Thank you for your compassion for the world and for our neighbors, for the hungry and unhoused, for the stranger and the marginalized.

*Thank you for giving - giving that touches people within our community and giving that reaches beyond the borders of our country. Thank you for the hands that reach not just into your pocket, but are extended in practical ways to support and partner with others working to feed and house people.*

Thank you for making a commitment to earth care: saving energy on our building, trying to be more earth-friendly in our practices, helping us all to learn about climate change and climate justice... and above all for understanding care for God’s creation as a faith issue.

*Thank you for being such an adaptable faith community. You don’t spend a lot of time trying to recreate some mythical golden age of the church. As circumstances and needs and resources and priorities and the culture have changed... you’ve always been willing to try something new, let an old thing go, find creative solutions to an unexpected challenge.*

Thank you for vacations.

*Vacations?!*

Well, we wouldn't have managed to be here for twenty-five years without them. ☺  
All kidding aside, you have always graciously encouraged us to take vacations – and even sabbatical time. Ministry can be exhausting and those breaks refresh us so that we can be there for you when you need us. And it's not just the vacations, but study leave time has given us opportunities to rethink our preaching, to sharpen our writing, re-  
envision approaches to mission and pastoral care, and just learn some new things to share with you.

*There are so many things to be thankful for, but these past few years I've been really thankful for your growing commitment to justice. I love that even while we were struggling to keep church going at the start of the pandemic, some of you were saying that we can't just let what happened to George Floyd go. And many of you studied resources on racism, and you talked at first on zoom, and then in person, and you led worship sharing your learnings. And even now, you just keep asking about the next thing we need to do.*

We could go on and on.

*Presbyterian women retreats. The opportunity to work with incredible leaders. Mission projects like Angel Tree. Ice cream Sundays in the summer. The fact that you trust us enough to share your struggles and allow us to be with you in times of grief.*

Some people might say this all sounds exhausting, and I admit that sometimes I'm a little tired just thinking about everything we're doing. But this is not us – the two of us - doing all this stuff – this *ministry*. It's you, all of you who are part of this faith community. And I get to work here!

*And I get to work here! Your gritudes may be different from ours, but gratitude will always keep you looking up, looking forward, just as it keeps us looking forward. Gratitude keeps us engaged. Gratitude brings hope. Learning, listening, caring, mission, justice, worship: these things build hope. Wherever we find something to be thankful for, we find hope.*

You know, Paul was in prison when he wrote to the church at Philippi. But you'd hardly know it based on the tone of his letter. In spite of his circumstances and the uncertain future of the Christian church, his hope is strong. He believes – he knows – that a community that lives the gospel is a powerful sign of hope.

*Paul's hope for the faith community in Philippi was rooted in gratitude. He was confident that their "sharing in the gospel" would bear much fruit. We know how he felt. It's still true that a Christian community that lives Jesus' gospel is a powerful sign of hope – for the future of Christ's church, and for the world. Thank you for being that hope for us. And thanks be to God for your partnership in the gospel, for all the ways you as a community of faith shine the light of hope in a troubled world.*

Amen. Amen.