

A Heart Revealed

Carolyn Wilson

 **Philippians 1:3-11**

Good morning. Well, as you know, this is my last Sunday as Director of Equipping at Church of the Palms. When Steve asked me if I wanted to preach today, as my Swan Song, I kind of knew what that meant but decided to look it up. Webster's number one definition is "a song of great sweetness said to be sung by a dying swan." Wikipedia says it is "a metaphorical phrase for a final gesture, effort, or performance given just before death or retirement." I'm definitely not retiring, quite the contrary, and I hope I'm not dying yet, so I'll go with Webster's second definition, "a farewell appearance or final act or pronouncement." Hopefully there will be some sweetness, too!

God has called me to a new place of ministry: Venice Presbyterian Church. It is a bittersweet change: bitter in that I will miss all of you, but it's mostly sweet, because I'm very excited about this new chapter of ministry for a number of reasons. First, God's fingerprints are all over this call. From providential timing and serendipitous crossing of paths, to how the doors were flung wide open and every step seemed blessed. Second, the work I will be doing at Venice Presbyterian Church is remarkably similar to my ministry experience at Church of the Palms so I am very excited about the ability to apply what I have learned here and in seminary in this new place God to which has called me. And third, it is a huge blessing to be staying so close. I want to thank you for all the sweet and thoughtful messages for blessing in my new role so many of you have expressed to me.

Now let's turn to our lesson. We usually read the Scripture passage first, but I would like to provide some context before reading it because I think it will make the text more meaningful and will help you get a sense of the emotion behind Paul's words.

So let's take a look at Philippi, and the founding of the church in that place: You can see where Philippi is geographically on the map – X marks the spot. It is in north eastern Greece in the region of Macedonia. In 356 BC, Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, took over the city and named it after himself. He established it as a military stronghold to protect the lands he had conquered

and the nearby gold mines. It was also important as a land route across Asia.

Philippi is famous for one particular event. In 42 BC Mark Antony and Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius, the assassins of Julius Caesar, in a battle at Philippi. Subsequently, Octavian, who was Caesar's heir, assumed the named Augustus and became the first Roman emperor and established Philippi as a Roman military outpost. The present municipality, Filippi, is located near the ruins of the ancient city of Philippi in Greece.

When Paul came to Philippi around 49 AD on his second missionary journey, it was an important urban center populated by both Romans and Greeks. He and Silas started out that journey from Antioch (again, X marks the spot), and went through Derbe and Lystra where Timothy joined them. As they were traveling through Galatia, Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia pleading with him to come there to help them. So Paul and his friends made their way to the city of Philippi. On the Sabbath, they looked for a place of prayer outside the city gate by the river and found a group of women and started talking to them. One of the women was a businesswoman named Lydia, who was a worshiper of God. She responded to Paul's message of the gospel and she and her whole household were baptized.

Shortly after that, there was an incident where Paul cast out a spirit of divination from a slave girl and thus ended her master's fortune telling business. Paul and Silas were arrested, beaten and jailed, the end result of which was that the Philippian jailer and his whole house became believers and were baptized. That was the beginning of the church at Philippi – Lydia's household, perhaps some of the women at the river, and the jailer's household.

About a dozen years later, Paul wrote this letter to the church. It is important to note is that this is a letter, a personal message, from Paul to a group of people he loved, in a church that he birthed. When you hear it, keep in mind that we are reading someone else's mail.

SCRIPTURE

Hear now Paul's words in Philippians 1:3-11 from the New Living Translation:

Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now. And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue

his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.

So it is right that I should feel as I do about all of you, for you have a special place in my heart. You share with me the special favor of God, both in my imprisonment and in defending and confirming the truth of the Good News. God knows how much I love you and long for you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus. I pray that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding. For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return. May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation - the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ - for this will bring much glory and praise to God.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord!

People: Thanks be to God!

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Let us pray: Gracious God, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Give us grace to receive your truth in faith and love, and strength to follow on the path you set before us; through Jesus Christ Our Lord, Amen.

A HEART & A PRAYER

I chose this passage of Paul's letter for today's message because in it, he shared his heart and his prayer for the Church at Philippi. And similarly, I want to share my heart and my prayer for you, my brothers and sisters in Christ at Church of the Palms.

In revealing his heart for the people of the Church at Philippi, Paul tells them that they have a special place in his heart. Every time he thinks of them, he gives thanks to God, and whenever he prays for them he is filled with joy. Why? Because they have been partners with him in spreading the Good News of the gospel ever since they first heard it. They

supported him with their prayers and gifts through thick and thin over the years.

As he penned that line, I wonder if he paused for a moment and pictured in his mind's eye the day that he met Lydia and the women by the river where he told them about Jesus and remembered how they eagerly believed and were baptized right away. He goes on to tell them that he knows they belong to God who will keep on working in them, and, that he personally loves them with the tender compassion of Christ.

MY HEART FOR THE PEOPLE OF CHURCH OF THE PALMS

Like Paul, I am thankful every time I remember the people of Church of the Palms. This church has such a tender heart for our community and for anyone who is hurting. In addition to the ongoing work of the Food Pantry, Preschool, Tutoring, Honduras missions, and other ministries, during the time that I have been here, you have added the ministry of our annual Day of Hope, supported Family Promise for two years, underwrote the translation of the Gospel of Luke and the Jesus film so that a people group in Nigeria could hear the gospel in their heart language and see it portrayed on film.

You've packed tens of thousands of meals for the people of Haiti, suitcases for children in trauma situations going into foster care, you've provided food, clothing, and a large commercial refrigerator to the people in Immokalee, prayer shawls, teddy bears, and much more.

You serve as greeters and ushers, teachers and small group leaders, helping us all to grow in our faith. You volunteer at the Welcome Center, New Member class and help new folks get connected and have a sense of belonging in our family of faith here. You follow up with visitors and work hard to make everyone feel welcome.

“I long for you to understand what really matters in a way that makes a positive difference in your life and in the lives of your family and the people around you...”

You make this a safe place for children and help create a sticky faith for our youth. You've built a new Palms Life Center so that we can reach out to our community to help even more people experience kingdom life and to bring them to a saving knowledge of Jesus.

And one of the things I cherish is that this is a place where people with opposite points of view treat each other with respect and can have civil discussions and work through issues together.

In all of this, you have allowed me to be a partner with you ever since God called me into full-time ministry. You were patient with me as I learned how to lead worship, you supported me all through seminary and our denomination's process of preparation for ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament with your love, your prayers and your gifts. It has been one of the greatest honors and privileges of my life to serve our Lord Jesus side-by-side with you. I am unspeakably grateful and you shall always have a special place in my heart.

PAUL'S PRAYER FOR THE CHURCH AT PHILIPPI

Paul's heart for the Philippians included a prayer for these people he loved so much. He longed for them with the tender compassion of Christ and his prayer for them was that their love would overflow more and more. And that they would keep on growing in knowledge and insight because he wanted them to understand what really matters in life, what has real and eternal value.

He longed for them to always be filled with the fruit of their salvation, which is an impeccable character produced in their lives by Christ and which brings much glory and praise to God. Not that they had already arrived – he himself had not – but that that this would be their aim.

MY PRAYER FOR THE PEOPLE OF CHURCH OF THE PALMS

As I follow God's call to the next chapter of my life serving Him, I would like to leave you with my prayer for you, my dear friends at Church of the Palms. Eight things that elaborate on Paul's prayer, and that I long for you with all my heart, because I can't think of anything higher or more noble or more important for any human being.

1. First, Like Paul, I long for you to keep on growing in knowledge and understanding, so that you grow stronger and stronger in your faith. To follow Jesus so closely, that, as the ancient Jewish proverb goes, you are covered in the dust of the rabbi. And that means to consistently measure

your life – all your choices and decisions and actions – by his example and by his teachings.

2. Second, I long for you to understand what really matters in a way that makes a positive difference in your life and in the lives of your family and the people around you, thriving with a deep sense of shalom, of well-being, of life that feels like real life, rather than living on a treadmill and just going through the motions every day.

3. Third, I long for you to know why you believe what you believe, not just to come to church because it's what you've always done. But as Peter tells us, "to always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have, doing this with gentleness and respect."

4. Fourth, I long for you to hold on to Jesus in the storms of life, to sense his comforting presence, and then to be his comforting presence to others. I love Erin O'Donnell's song *Hold onto Jesus*. In her first stanza she says: "You're a little piece of heaven. You're a golden ray of light And I wish I could protect you from the worries of this life But if there's one thing I could tell you it's no matter what you do hold to Jesus, He's holding onto you".

5. Fifth, I long for you to find your gift, that treasure that God has placed within you that enables you to serve others in a way that fills your heart with joy. We have all been gifted with the ability to make a difference in others' lives and whether you can do little or much, you can change the world one life at a time. The dreams God puts in your heart to live a life of significance by making a difference will look different at different stages of life, but if you have a pulse, you have a purpose. One of my favorite stories that illustrates this is *The Star Thrower*. The short version goes like this:

One day a man was walking along the shore; as he looked down the beach, he saw a human figure moving like a dancer. He smiled to himself to think of someone who would dance to the day, so he began to walk faster to catch up. As he got closer, he saw that it was a young man and the young man wasn't dancing, but instead, he was reaching down to the sand, picking up something and very gently throwing it into the ocean. As he got closer he called out, "Good morning! What are you doing?" The young man paused, looked up and replied, "Throwing Starfish into the ocean. The sun is up and the tide is going out and if I don't throw them in they'll die. "But young man, don't you realize that there are miles and miles

of beach and Starfish all along it, you can't possibly make a difference!" The young man listened politely, then bent down, picked up another Starfish and threw it into the sea, past the breaking waves and said. "It made a difference for that one."

6. Sixth, I long for you, as I long for myself, to automatically, without thinking, overflow more and more with the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We can't make fruit. Fruit is the result of a natural growth process and the fruit of the Spirit are the natural result of spending time with Jesus and letting him transform us into his likeness.

7. Seventh, I long for you to know, as well as you know your own name, that Jesus is unique in all the world, in all the history of the world. As you recite the Apostles' Creed each week, let the words penetrate your mind and heart and soul so that you fully grasp the reality of them and they impact you where you live. Other religions may take us part way to God and there is much we can learn from each other. But Jesus Christ IS God – fully human, fully God, the 2nd person of the Trinity. He was the Passover Lamb, God's own sacrifice who paid for our sins and the sins of the whole world. And whether in this life or the next, one day, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

8. And lastly, I long for you to echo Reese Nippert, a student in our youth group, an acolyte, a witness for Christ in her school, and an inspiration to me personally. She shared her testimony at our Hero Effect class nearly two years ago, about how God has helped her overcome her struggle with RSD, an intensely painful autoimmune condition, and how he led her to organize a stuffed animal drive for children in the hospital. At age 11, she closed her story by saying these words to a room full of adults: "I just love following God and Jesus. I think it's the only way to live."

This, my friends, is my heartfelt prayer for you. Amen.



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