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First Presbyterian Church, Willmar MN
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"The Journey Begins"

The scripture you're about to hear this morning was written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Philippi. It is a warmly affectionate letter, with many personal flourishes. The love Paul has for his friends in the church is evident as he encourages them in their faith, teaches them, and corrects them.

These opening verses, which contain a salutation and personal greeting, are particularly beautiful and heartfelt. Here is a mentor, teacher, friend, a sort of father in the faith, reaching out to his beloved community. Paul's longing and love for them rises from the page centuries after the writing:

Philippians 1: 1-11

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:

2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's Prayer for the Philippians

3 I 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 on 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.

Today is a special day in the life of our congregation. It's confirmation Sunday. Today is the day we recognize four youth who have grown up, nurtured by this congregation, for a few years or for many, and are standing before you ready to confirm their faith in Christ. They are ready to stand before you, their church family, and state their intention to join with this particular member of the body of the family of Christ. And just as the church in Philippi had its Paul, who planted the seeds of faith in the lives of the church there – who taught them, loved them, and encouraged them in their lives of faith. So too, our confirmands have had their Pauls. People like their confirmation mentors who loved them and encouraged them in their lives of faith. People like their families who brought them to this place or one like it to be baptized. People like their grandparents, Sunday School teachers, youth group leaders, mission trip volunteers, and more who have walked alongside of them as they grew in their faith to reach this point.

All of these people are akin to, as Paul puts it “the saints in Christ Jesus” to whom Paul is writing his letter in verse 1. They are all the Christians, all the people of faith, living in that church that mutually encourage each other and love each other in the faith. For our confirmands this morning, you are “all the saints in Christ Jesus,” to them. And not only that, each one of us here has had a “Paul,” who was our own mentor - somebody who loved us and encouraged us in our faith in order to get to this point this morning.

In fact, you're all probably thinking of someone right now who has played an instrumental role in teaching you, instructing you in your faith, teaching you what it means to love Jesus, to follow the greatest commandment to love God and to love your neighbor. You're probably thinking of a beloved family member, a mentor, a friend. You're maybe thinking of someone who modeled what it meant to be a faithful follower of Jesus. That person may have given you some valuable advice, some encouragement, or they were there for you when you needed someone. Maybe they just quietly modeled with their life what it meant to be a Christian.

If so I want you to think of that person and I want you to hold them in your mind, whether they are still with us, or whether they have gone to join the saints in glory. I want you to hear the words that Paul wrote to the Philippians which we just read a minute ago, and I want you to hear them again. Only this time, I want

you to hear the words in the voice of that person you're thinking of right now. I want you to hear the words of encouragement Paul had for his beloved friends in the voice of your "Paul," your mentor, your family member, your teacher, your leader. Hear these words of encouragement in their voice:

2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 I thank my God every time I remember you, 4 constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, 5 because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 I 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. 7 It 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. 8 For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. 9 And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight 10 to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, 11 having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

If there are two takeaways from today's message that I want you to hear in that message of love and encouragement, it is these: First, it is from verse 4, that you are not alone in this world, nor in this life of faith. Second, it is from verse 6, that God, "who began a good work among you will bring it to completion."

The first statement: you are not alone. I love verses 3-5 of this passage, they are a wonderful assurance of friendship and affection, "3 I thank my God every time I remember you, 4 constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, 5 because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now." Did you know that there are people that thank God when they remember you? Did you know that there are people that pray when they remember you? Did you know that there are people that share in the work of the kingdom of God with you? That is the simple beauty of the church when it is working as intended. To think of others, to pray for others, to work together.

Not only that, but when you were baptized, the church made a promise to you - often when you were but an infant, and had done nothing to deserve such a commitment - to care for you, love you, pray for you, and raise you as a disciple of Christ in a Christian community. Today, we see a step in the fulfillment of that

promise for our four confirmands. But we also know that this is an open promise. God is always seeking to enlarge and enliven this circle of love and encouragement by inviting others to know and love God. We are the messengers of this good news. There's room for more!

The second promise is that God who began a good work in you will bring it to completion in Christ. This is a fabulous statement about the love of God at work in our lives. This power of God working in your life is an enduring idea. It is at work even before we are conscious of it. The prophet Jeremiah praises God who him saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you." (Jeremiah 1: 5). The Psalmist writes of a God who searches and knows us, discerns our thoughts from far away, and is acquainted with all of our ways (Psalm 139: 1-3). In accord with these concepts, we affirm them when we baptize an infant: That God has already loved and known this child before any of us were capable of doing so. And God has loved, and will continue to love this child. God's love came first, for "we love because he first loved us." (1 John 4: 19). In other words, from our first breath to our last days, God is doing a good work in us, every step of the way.

On Confirmation day, we step back, we take a deep breath, and we take a long view of this work being done in the lives of confirmands. We remember the love of God for them which was sealed in their baptisms. We see the fruit of the love of so many Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, family members, pastors, mentors, and friends, who have had a hand in bringing them to this place at this moment. And we see the work that has been done in them so far, to make them people of Jesus, committed to following him, called to love God, and to love their neighbors as he commands us.

And we also look back in our own lives and praise God for the works God is still doing our lives, those things that God is still bringing to fruition for us: The sanding off of our rough edges, the healing of our sorrows, shame, anxieties, and grief. The chances we've had to hear the good news of the Gospel, that "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5: 17). To love and be loved by a God who gives us 2nd chances, 3rd chances, indeed, seven times seventy chances to have our feet set back upon the path and get back to the business of loving God and loving the world in God's name. To be a forgiven people, marked by God's grace. To know the blessing of being a work in progress, to whom the Spirit of

God is working and re-working on us until that day our baptisms are made complete in Christ.

So today is a milestone - A chance to take a long look back to our baptisms, and see how far we've come. To take a moment to think of those people who are our saints, who have loved us, mentored us, and encouraged us to get where we are today. To give thanks for our church family, and to remember that we are not alone. And also to give thanks that God is at work in our lives; that God is bringing a good work in us to completion. That God is using this faith community and others like it to help us mature. That God is at work in us to show grace, offer forgiveness, and show us a different way of life and living characterized by love of God and neighbor.

I don't know about you, but these things fill me with hope. It causes me to rejoice with you and for you. It causes me to look forward to a coming day, that Paul hoped for, and we all should hope for when God's work is made complete in us. And so my hope for us all this morning is that's Paul prayer from verses 9-11 might cover and shelter over all of us "that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that on 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."

May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.