



COMMUNITY
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

MINISTER
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*Second Sunday of Advent
December 10, 2006*

Phillipians 1:3-11

In My Prayers

Intro: Our second New Testament lesson is from Paul's letter the Philippians. He is writing from prison, it is not clear just which one. Over the years he toured many. Paul started the church in Philippi many years before this was written. The people there held a special place in his heart for they had supported his missionary trips with prayer and finances. Paul's letters would be read out loud during a service of worship that would take place in someone's home. So imagine a living room filled with people, listening to Paul's words.

Well, the Christmas cards are starting to roll in. My sister-in-law has kept up a seven year streak of getting a card delivered the day after Thanksgiving. I don't know how she does it. (She is from Monica's side - my family counts any card delivered before Valentines' day as "on-time".) Like many cards this year, it came with the wonderful, dreaded, "Christmas letter." I say this, while in the process of trying to write one myself. These "one size fits all" letters are wonderful in that you get lots of information about friends and family. They are dreaded if you have to write one because there seems to be an unstated competition in describing how wonderful the past year was. It is the rare letter indeed that says "this past year was a tough one, for a while we thought the wheels might fall off". I think a stumbling point in writing these letters is that they are

not directed to anyone in particular and we long to share different feelings with different people. Maybe, sometimes, we write a something on the side of a copied letter to make a deeper personal connection.

Paul's letter to the Philippians was very personal. The apostle Paul was rarely mistaken for a mushy guy. He was known for his intensity, his zeal, and his temper. Now in these words to some of his closest friends, it seems like he is singing "I'll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams." What he does by sharing his prayers, is to give the Philippians a look into that very private world of his personal prayers and see just how much they really mean to him. Paul is writing to people he knows and cares for and says "when I pray I give thanks to

God for you. It is with joy that I pray for each one of you. Good things are happening and good things will continue, I pray that God will show you what is best."

John Calvin describes prayer as expanding our hearts before God. I have always loved that definition and often use it when inviting others to pray with me. When we pray in public we share with others a glimpse of that most personal and intimate relationship we share with God. We reveal something about ourselves as we pray while others can hear. As a parent there is nothing to compare with the first time you hear your child praying on their own, when they are just talking with God. They might pray, "thank you for mommy and daddy", or "be with my friends, bless my teacher, or help our cat catch a mouse." It could be anything, but in that moment we see them in a different way, once we've heard them pray and had that glimpse of what they care about.

As a pastor, public prayer is something that is an everyday part of what I am called to do in worship and meetings. What I'd like to do this morning is share with you some of my personal prayer, I think that is what Paul is doing with his letter. For me, there are two favorite times for private prayer, silently at night and out loud here in the empty sanctuary. I tend to pray longer at night, and sometimes I fall asleep before I get to amen. I hope God doesn't take offense. I love praying in worship with the sanctuary filled with people, but I also find I enjoy praying here when it is empty. I like to sit in different places out there, and I know I have prayed in every pew. Some of you have favorite seats to sit and I pray for

people by name if I am in your spot. As I pray both silently and out loud, I allow times for silence just being aware of a connection to God, and times for words saying what is on my heart.

In my prayers I give thanks for many things. At Community there is a spirit that can't be described or contained. It just is. It is something to be thankful for. There is a sense of community can't be manufactured, or disguised. It just is. Within this congregation there is an encouragement of and outreach toward children. There is hope for the years to come. I give thanks for the way the youngest people here feel at home. That's great. This is a place that people care about and a place where people feel cared for.

Our prayer tree is one sign of how care is expressed. People actively lift up in special prayer those in difficult times, or those in moments of great celebration. Praying with and for each other is unique way of caring. Kim and I include the people on the prayer tree in our personal prayers. There are people who wash communion cups, water the plants, or hand out bulletins. Just doing the things that need to be done. And there are so many other acts of caring that may seem everyday or not often noticed, but they are done freely and out of love for the other. That is ministry as Jesus showed us. In my prayers I name the joy of how we let God's love flow through us to others.

For me a personal joy that I give thanks for is the opportunity to become involved in individual lives, knowing about everyday

things you face, and also being welcomed into situations of great pain, or joy. I don't take it lightly that I can come to a home or a hospital room and be there, or ask questions that don't come up in everyday conversations. It is a rare privilege to speak deeply with people about their faith, to be in a position to listen to heartfelt concerns, or be present at time of death. I give thanks for the opportunity to preach, and baptize, and marry, and remember loved ones. It is a wonderful privilege.

Paul says his prayer is that God will complete the good work that has started in the people of Philippi. He affirms the gift and the calling each member of the church there had in bringing the Kingdom a little closer. He was delighted with what he had seen unfold so far, and commended them to look forward with hope and joy. Even still he knew that everything was not right, and the congregation faced challenges as they went forward. As a church they needed to discern what was best and what was right for the days to come.

The same is true here at Community Presbyterian. 2006 has had any number of challenges. We might all pray for more of God's insight and understanding as we head into a new year. My prayer is that we continue to grow in our love for God, our service of Christ and kindness for each other. I, too, hope that our cups of understanding will reach overflowing. May God come into our individual lives and the life of Community Presbyterian this Advent, to inspire us to wonder and soak us with grace.

Praying with and for each other is an essential aspect of our life together as a church. Prayer is part of what we do here that is different than anywhere else. May we pray for each other, with each other, knowing that it makes a difference. Jesus shows us, Paul shows us, how much it matters to say out loud what is on our hearts. Renewal starts with prayer. Advent is a season for renewal. Advent is a time for sharing God's love and showing our love for one another. As we pass through these days may we show love with our actions and in our prayers. I pray that we all pray for our congregation. Amen.