

The Cause of the Gospel
Philippians 4:1-9
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I have been part of the 1001 Coaching Network for about twenty years. I absolutely love gathering with this group of men and women. I started meeting with this group when I was serving a new church development in Cherokee Presbytery. I've had the privilege of being trained as a coach by this group and have even coached four pastors through the beautiful and difficult landscape of new church ministry. Now I relate to this group because 1001 New Worshiping Communities is part of my ministry portfolio in Theology, Formation and Evangelism.

I enjoy this gathering of people because Jesus is at the center of our life together, there is great diversity and much joy. Last year during our time together, I was talking with a friend who shared with me a conversation he had with the manager of the hotel in which we were staying. He said the manager was not a Christian, but he was drawn to our gathering. The manager repeated several times to my friend that we were not like Christians he knew. He said that we were so diverse and had such joy about us. He started asking questions about why such a difference. So, after a long conversation my friend invited the manager to come experience our life together by joining us in our closing dinner and worship! Basically, he invited him to experience the gospel, a context in which love overflows.

Philippians is a marvelous book of the Bible! It was written to Christians in Philippi in a different context many, many years ago. Philippians reminds me of my purpose. Paul writes, "So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover's life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God" (Philippians 1:9-11 The Message). What a wonderful prayer for the church then and now. Let's explore together three essential ingredients of this calling we have to let our love abound more and more, which is the cause of the gospel.

The first is the centrality of Christ. Paul is writing to the Christians in Philippi to let them know how grateful he is that they are partners in the mission of God, this gospel of Jesus Christ. He is dealing with real life problems with the best theology he has. He does not save his theology for presentations and for theological education and conversation. But his theology comes out of his changing life in Christ, which is becoming his sole reason for living. "For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21).

I'm not sure what is going on between Euodia and Syntyche. But they are crossed up and their conflict has the potential to divide the body of Christ. Maybe they are crossed up over the color of the carpet in the parlor or maybe they have taken different sides on one of the Theological issues threatening to divide the church in Philippi. There is a group telling new Christians that to follow Christ and experience the freedom of new life, they must adhere to all the Jewish laws. Maybe Euodia is choosing to align herself with this group, while Syntyche is believing that Jesus is enough. Maybe, just maybe, one of them is clinging too much to the power of the empire. The people of Philippi are proud that they are a Roman outpost and known throughout the Empire as "Little Rome." They are very patriotic and suspicious of any person or movement not aligned with and loyal to Caesar. (Can Jesus be

enough? Can you serve two masters?) Paul does not tell them to just get along, but he writes, “I plead with them to have the same mind in Christ.” And he asks the church to help these women work out their difference for the cause of the gospel.

The second ingredient is the consequence of the gospel. Paul is willing to give up the best he has because of Christ and the cause of the gospel. In chapter three, Paul basically says that he counts everything that he once depended on as trash. Because of Christ, he places all that he ever depended on for safety and validation on the trash pile. Because of God’s love in Jesus, Paul is on a journey of letting go. Let’s for a moment think about our lives. How are we different because of God’s love in Jesus? How are we dying to the old ways to be raised up to new life in Christ?

I am more open to Jesus and letting go of the things that have propped up my life over the years. Because of Jesus, I am on a journey of giving up some harmful ways that I have used to manage my life: pleasing people and trying to be perfect. But I am also on a journey of giving up what’s precious to me: my education, my political party, my resources, and even my life. And before we know it, our hearts begin to break over the people and things that break God’s heart. When people in Iran suffer, we suffer. When fires devastate Australia, we mourn with them. When people do not have the same access to living-giving resources because of the color of their skin, our hearts break. And here’s the thing about a breaking heart. You are never the same. You can no longer be silent. You are compelled to work for justice, which is our love abounding right where we live.

Here is the deal! The church can end structural racism. It’s evil and can only truly be defeated through God’s love in Jesus. The church can end poverty. We can come alongside people and help people have the fullest life possible. The church can become more vital. We can be a people joining in God’s mission each and every day.

The third ingredient is that the peace of Christ will guard our hearts. We too live in a context. We live in a very divided nation. We are part of the church, which is not the same as our nation. We are to be in the world, but not of the world. And each one of us has our own demons that haunt us. We are very different. We are white and people of color. We are rich and poor. We have all sorts of education levels. We are from small towns and big cities. We are Republicans and Democrats. We are male and female. But we have something in common. We are followers of Christ and are called to join God’s mission.

And the good news is we do not have to be anxious about anything. As we bring our lives to God in Christ, there is peace. As we live into God’s mission of justice and hope in Christ, there is peace. Paul says, “The peace of God, which is beyond understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7). He instructs them to pray knowing the peace of God is with them.

And here is the key: the very mission of God, which is wholeness, justice, righteous living, and salvation will guard you. God’s peace is God’s mission. This restorative peace is our very salvation and it is for the salvation of the world. Paul’s prayer becomes reality: “So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover’s life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus

would be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:9-11).

In my life and ministry, I have caught enough glimpses of this truth to know that my purpose is to become more like Jesus in both the beauty and difficulty of life. I have been on a journey of experiencing the expansive nature of God. I am finding again and again that my peace is my mission. The saving love of God for me is wrapped up in God’s love for the world. When I join God in this mission my life makes sense.

In my first church, I was part of establishing the first Habitat for Humanity house in the state of Mississippi. What a beautiful and difficult journey! But I encountered God and God’s peace in the beauty and difficulty of that season. Every day we encountered racism. We were trying to build the first house for a family in need. But because the family was African American, there was resistance to selling property for the first Habitat house. But we prayed, worked, and read scripture together. We did not give up and we built that first house. We built the house in the face of great resistance. But before we knew it, we had people from all walks of life working on that house. And we finally finished the house.

And I remember the day we celebrated the family moving into their first home. There were people from every walk of life worshipping and eating together. I still remember the deep feeling of peace that day. It was a peace that passes understanding because we were about the cause of the gospel. The calling of the church is that we are Christ for the world. We give ourselves away for the sake of others. This mission cannot be programmed. The call is to grow up in Christ to serve others in God’s redemptive, incarnational mission. This is the cause of the gospel. Thank you. I am grateful to be a partner with you in the cause of the gospel. Amen.