

“Beginning at the End” (fn.:PHILIPPIANS 1 3-11.2019.DOC)

Scripture: Philippians 1:3-11

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12 years ago, I stood in this pulpit for the first time and said the following:

I don't know where to begin. So I going to skip the beginning and go the end. I have much better sense of the ending, having just gone through an ending. But more than that, knowing the ending makes the beginning clearer.

And the title of that sermon was the same as today: “Beginning at the End.” Twelve years ago, I addressed the end-point with a reflection on a portion of the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Philippi.

With the news of my upcoming retirement at the end of January, it seemed appropriate to return to this Scripture reading. First, because we are approaching that end-point...and second, because Paul was writing the kind of letter that many of our mothers taught us to write...a thank you note. As we approach the holiday of Thanksgiving, a Scripture reading addressing gratitude is most appropriate.

Paul's letter to the church in Philippi is a thank-you letter to a congregation with whom he had served in ministry together and a congregation that has recently sent him help during his difficulties. Paul had been arrested for his Christian service. A sermon for another day might be to reflect on if you or I were arrested for our Christian service, would there be sufficient evidence to convict us? Paul knows he is likely at the end of his career, so not only is he is saying “thank you,” he is reflecting on what the end means, what the end feels like, and what has brought him to this end.

Philippians 1:3-11: 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 in 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.*

Of the several wonderful themes in this text, I will highlight same three I did 12 years ago: memory, mutual service, and trust in the One who begins all things.

Memory—that's what we have been about together: creating memories. Paul declares that he gives thanks every time he remembers the church in Philippi. Memory is vital to who we are. Memory is the focus of our gathering for Thanksgiving—as we “Count our many blessings, count them one by one. Count your many blessings, see what God has done”—a song I learned in the church nursery. Memory is vital to what it means to be a human being.

You may recall that in the great Greek epic poem, *The Odyssey*, the main character, Odysseus, is given the opportunity to live on the island of Calypso. Calypso is related to our word “apocalypse”—

“calypso” means covered or hidden; *apo-calypso* means “uncovered” or “revealed” (thus our book of Revelation also known as the Apocalypse of John). In *The Odyssey*, here is what it means to live on Calypso—the covered or hidden place: Odysseus can each day be young again, bathe in the sun, drink his fill of Pina Colodas or gin and tonics, eat food without thought of calories, fat grams, sodium, sugar, or cholesterol. Everyday can be like a beautiful fall Saturday, tailgating and singing *Rocky Top*, and beating Alabama! Indeed, each day Odysseus could be with beautiful people in all the ways that man would want (yes, in all the ways)...and then next day do the same thing. The only thing Odysseus has to give up is his memory. Every day will be a sensual paradise—the only cost is that he will forget the past—the past is wiped away or “covered.” Wouldn’t that be wonderful...to be able to forget all that bad stuff and simply enjoy the best of life? And yet Odysseus chooses to leave Calypso. He chooses suffering, distress, loss, aging, and eventually death over staying on Calypso...because memory is that important.

When we consider the Apostle Paul’s words, he says he remembers the church in Philippi—he has memories of their service together. Paul treasures the memories of shared service, as I certainly will do with 12 years in Knoxville. So, here is the second theme for us today: shared service. Paul shared ministry with those in Philippi.

Mutual or shared service...does that mean every one liked Paul in the congregation? No. Does that mean that Paul liked every one in the congregation in Philippi? No. Paul’s giving of thanks is not a popularity thing...it is about what he and that congregation had shared together. And their joint memory is of service together.

Here is what I said 12 years ago:

Here is one of my core commitments as a called pastor of this congregation. I am here as a servant among servants. That’s the ideal. We will be creating memories of our service together. The rub, of course, comes when it comes to discerning my service and your service. And the pronouns “my” and “your” illustrate the problem: you and I, fallible human beings, are defining what is our Godly service, our faithful service. And that is not always clear.

First Presbyterian Church is not “my church” and not “your church”—we are God’s church. And on Christ the King Sunday, we make this affirmation together. We are servants of the King. And what we have been about for 12 years is seeking that right balance of shared service.

In the first congregation where I served—a small congregation—there was a member who called me regularly to come see her. I was a young pastor...wanted to be helpful...wanted to serve God...so I went each time she called. Then it dawned on me—she called me to come see her every time there was a major thunderstorm coming. Now this was hot and humid Florida; there are a lot of thunderstorms. She was frightened of thunderstorms and she wanted her pastor to be with her.

My service began to change...that was not what I sensed God was calling me to do. No longer would I go, but I would pray with her over the phone. I would coach her to face her fear...and I would say, “No, I cannot be there for you each time there is a thunderstorm, but let’s remember that God is faithful and will be with you.”

This is not a success story in ministry. She left the church. She sincerely felt and said as much to any who would listen that I was not a “real” pastor, not a caring person, not a servant of God. I was not there for her, she said, when she needed me.

Finding our service has not always been easy but mutual service is what we are about...each of us discerning what God is calling us do, but listening particularly to the way that God speaks to us in this particular community. Here is a wonderful by-product. Mutual service has a way of overcoming differences. For example, I have participated in several Habitat for Humanity building projects. I have been up on the roof with church members from other churches that are very different from our denomination, the PCUSA. I have worked with faithful Christians with whom I would have major disagreements about such things as the ordination of women (me, yes...they no)...on divorce (me...not a great outcome but it does not make a person forever ineligible for ordination...they: it means a person absolutely cannot be a minister or officer in the church). And yet on that roof, those differences do not make one bit of difference. It is about nailing the shingles on straight so the house will not leak and another servant of God and their family will have an affordable home. Servanthood trumps all those differences. Mission together overcomes those divisions. Indeed, my participation in Justice Knox has been built on this by-product—I know of no other place where Christians, Jews, and Moslems come together...where the racial blend is not “lily-white”...where Catholics, Baptists, Adventists, and...Presbyterian come together.

Creating memories of our shared service...that’s the ending that I envisioned for us twelve years ago. And conclusion comes in these words that I lift out of Paul’s reflection on the ending. Paul says: “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.”

Some of our memories will be wonderful; some will not. Some of our service has been uniting; some has not. Some of our ministry together has been inspiring; some has not. But our confidence—the confidence of the Apostle Paul—is that the One who began a good work among us will bring it to completion...not on my day and not on your day but on the day of Jesus Christ. God will complete what God has begun...on God’s day, and so we began this morning with the Call to Worship that highlighted that “This is the day the Lord has made.” (Psalm 118:24).

One of my favorite stories that you have probably heard me tell before is about the great Protestant Reformer Martin Luther. Martin Luther is remembered for his courage and conviction as well as his fear and anxiety. In today’s world we would wonder if Martin Luther did not need some medication or at least serious counseling. He committed to becoming a priest during a thunderstorm that scared him out his wits. He once saw the devil in his room and threw an inkwell at him, ending up with a nice ink stain on the wall, but he seemed to have missed the infernal visitor (by the way, in the room where this happened, tourists are shown the ink stain on the wall!) Luther was incredibly anxious about his leadership in the developing Reformation—so many intelligent, powerful, and even Christian people were saying he was wrong...horribly wrong...Satanically wrong.

Luther tells that in darkest times, when he questioned if he was really doing the right thing, he would speak these words to himself: “I am baptized...I am baptized.” Like most Presbyterians, Luther had no recollection of his baptism. He had nothing to do with it. His parents had taken him down to the parish church, and the priest had baptized him as an infant. For Luther this “fact” of his baptism, with which he had nothing do, was a reminder that God had begun with him long before Luther began with God. God would finish the work begun in his baptism. Luther’s self-coaching

or self-encouragement was to say: "I am baptized." God would complete the good work begun in that baptism.

In the creating of memories of our servanthood together, my confidence is not in me and not in you...likewise, your confidence is not in me or yourselves. Our confidence is that of the apostle Paul at the ending: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you [and me] will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

The day of Jesus Christ...already the light of that day is evident among us in the midst of all the shadows. This the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. (Psalm 118:24).