

4FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 12:2-6  
SECOND LESSON: Philippians 1:3-11  
January 5, 2025  
**Pastor Lisa's last Sunday**  
COMMUNION

### ***"I Thank My God"***

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Unlike me, Paul was never able to stay in one place very long. He founded churches, grew close to people, and then moved on keeping in touch through letters. The church at Philippi was a congregation dear to his heart. They consistently supported him in times of deepest need. But they were not perfect! And this is very encouraging because no church is perfect. There were people in the Philippian church advocating the idea that everyone needed to convert to Judaism in order to become Christians. There were those on the opposite end teaching that people could do anything they wanted—none of it mattered. And, heaven forbid, there were even personality conflicts! Two women leaders, Euodia and Syntyche, were not on speaking terms with one another. But none of these problems caused Paul to give up on them. Instead, he thanked God on behalf of ALL of the members of the church. He thanked God for their partnership—or in Greek—*koinonia*—in sharing the gospel with the world.

*Koinonia* is a word you may have heard or seen, because Christian groups do use it. I have a small pastor's group that meets in my home that we tongue in cheek named the "*koinonia*" group because of the koi fish in my pond, but what *koinonia* really means is sharing, participating and contributing. To be engaged in *koinonia* is to be a member of a team. There are no spectators in the body of Christ. Each and every part is important. And Paul was confident that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." I am here today to tell you that although Penn Wynne has come full circle and is now very small once more, this is not the end of the story. I am confident that he who began a good work in you will carry it to completion. Every ending is a new beginning. The church at Philippi was small and had its share of problems, but it lasted at least 300 years, only ceasing to exist when the town itself crumbled into ruins. Do not let humans discourage you. God is the one who is in charge.

Paul offered a prayer for the Philippian congregation, and it is a prayer that I share for the congregation of Penn Wynne. Paul prayed, "that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the

day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.”

To abound is to increase, overflow and grow, and we are called to abound in agape love. As I thought about how to sum up the ministry of this place three words came to mind—three things that Penn Wynne offers to the world—acceptance, grace and healing, and agape love undergirds all three. This is what we have to give to those who are hurting and lost. This is what we have to offer to our neighbors and the world. Humanly speaking we think of love as an emotion, and if we are “not feelin’ it” it doesn’t happen. If we don’t like someone we don’t help them. But agape love is pure unbiased love. It is the kind of love that does what is right for another, even when it’s an off day, even when they are strangers, even when we don’t like their personality or actions. It is the love that welcomes people unconditionally and accepts them for where they are and who they are. It is the kind of love that offers grace, forgiveness and second chances. It is the kind of love that heals.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of churches who do not operate out of agape love. I heard a distressing example of this just this week. A woman I know had attended a church for about a year. One Sunday her car broke down close to the church. It would not go forward. It was stuck in reverse. She didn’t know what to do. As she struggled and looked for help members of the church walked right past her. They avoided eye contact. They didn’t want to be late for the service. Men, women and children, all walked right past. Not one stopped to help. The church doors closed, and she was left outside still stuck. It was then that a stranger came along, a man not involved in the church at all. He helped her get her car out of the road and running properly again. She thanked him profusely. And she never went back to that church again.

Doing what is right even when it’s really inconvenient and we don’t feel like it is a ministry of this congregation, a ministry I have seen consistently fulfilled in the past 29 plus years.

Paul also prayed for knowledge and depth of insight, and he used some very specific words. This too is my prayer for you all going forward. Knowledge in this case isn’t just head knowledge or academic knowledge, it is ALL knowledge including moral, ethical and spiritual knowledge. It is to know God. Knowledge and insight are multi-layered. God’s gift to us is discernment, maturity and wisdom. There is a breadth of experience in this congregation, and my prayer for you is that this experience that will help you to avoid falling for quick fixes for deep problems, that your feet may be on the ground and your eyes on God. It’s not going to be easy. You’re used to things being the way they have always been. Now Vicki and I won’t be here. But you all will be here, and you have everything you need because you have the Holy Spirit.

It is these things, overflowing agape love, knowledge, insight and wisdom that will enable this congregation to discern what is best going forward. There will be choices ahead, and it is important to make the right choices. It’s not always a matter of good versus bad. It is often good versus best. Life is complex. We are to bring each turning point into the light to and make decisions without fear or favor. And once the decisions have been made, once you have a new pastor in place, will things go back to normal? No! God is leading you into a new thing, and a new normal. We all want to be comfortable,

but spiritual growth is uncomfortable. The good news is you can be uncomfortable **together** and love one another with pure agape love.

Paul says in the middle of this passage that it is right for him to feel the way he does about this congregation. He is thankful and joyful. He is confident that God has been working in their lives and will continue to do so. Amen to that! Like Paul with the faithful in Philippi, I will always hold you in my heart. I am thankful for Penn Wynne. We have been through thick and thin together, good times and bad. There have been dark days and joyous occasions. We have shared our lives and our struggles.

The Church is not the pastor. The Church is the people, the community of the faithful, the body of Christ. Pastors do not stay forever. **God stays forever.** The future here depends upon all of you taking time to listen for God's voice, and to faithfully work together. People in our consumerist American society have fallen prey to false thinking. They literally "church shop," looking for congregations based on what they can get. God does not build churches that way. God wants us to look at what we have to give, and to ask, "*Where do you want me to serve, Lord? Where am I called to be?*" We are to seek first the kingdom. It will be exciting to see what new direction God has in mind for Penn Wynne, because there is a new direction out there. With perseverance, creativity and agape love, the future awaits. Amen.

Isaiah 12:2-6

<sup>2</sup> Surely God is my salvation;

I will trust and not be afraid.

The Lord, the Lord himself, is my strength and my defense;  
he has become my salvation."

<sup>3</sup> With joy you will draw water  
from the wells of salvation.

<sup>4</sup> In that day you will say:

"Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name;  
make known among the nations what he has done,  
and proclaim that his name is exalted.

<sup>5</sup> Sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things;  
let this be known to all the world.

<sup>6</sup> Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion,  
for great is the Holy One of Israel among you."

Philippians 1:3-11

<sup>3</sup> I thank my God every time I remember you. <sup>4</sup> In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy <sup>5</sup> because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, <sup>6</sup> being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

<sup>7</sup> It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. <sup>8</sup> God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

<sup>9</sup> And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, <sup>10</sup> so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup> filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.