

A Parting Prayer

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on July 21, 2024
Friendship Presbyterian Church

*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,
To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. 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. 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. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1:1-11, NRSV)

It's good for us to be here together today. This space, this spot of earth, is holy ground, but even here, coming to church on a summer Sunday morning is hardly something to be taken for granted.

You may have heard of the woman who's getting dressed for church, but she sees her husband is still in bed. "Better get up and get dressed for church!" she says.

"I'm not going to church!" he replies angrily.

"Come on, honey, let's not do this every Sunday morning. Get up and get dressed."

"No! I'm not going to church! I'm tired of church: I don't believe any of that stuff, it's boring, and it's full of hypocrites. I just can't stand it! I'm not going!"

The woman patiently endures her husband's tirade, but when he's done, she responds, "Look, honey, I'll give you *three* reasons why you *are* going to church today: First, it's *good* for you. Second, it's a good example to set for the kids. Third, *you're the pastor.*"

Yes, even pastors can have their moments! In my circles, over 30 years of ministry, I have certainly heard some horror stories, when the spirit of love, fellowship, and partnership between church members and other church members, and church members and their pastor has broken down. I have heard some stories ... once *lived* such a story ... and so have you.

But sometimes these relationships thrive by the grace of God. Sometimes because – and sometimes in *spite* of – the players involved, something *beautiful* happens ... *Grace* happens ... and lives are changed for the better. Sometimes, they're even changed forever.

Such was the case with the Christian community in Philippi, founded and nourished in the beginning by the Apostle Paul himself. This epistle was written by him several years after this founding, and though Paul had moved on to plant new worshipping communities, he still passionately cared for and stayed in touch with this dear church – hoping to continue to feed it and help it grow.

And be clear that Paul is in no easy position when he writes this. He's in *prison* for his work in spreading the gospel, and churches would have motive to disavow him in a sad effort to save their own skins. But Paul is not in despair, and the Philippians are not turning their backs.

When I read the passage a moment ago, did you *hear* him? Did you hear the love and joy leaping off the written page as he recalls this small church and its key role in his life and ministry? Can you hear his tears of gratitude? Can you hear his laughter of joy?

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. (Philippians 1:3-5, NRSV)

Now I'll be honest: I haven't always understood or fully sympathized with the Apostle Paul. Perhaps you know what I mean. There have been times when his words have soared over my comprehension, and other times I feel I've understood him perfectly well and have wished to take a few steps back.

But on *this* day, our minds are one ... our hearts are one. I stand with him and join him in celebrating a partnership of the soul, for you, Friendship Presbyterian Church, are *my* beloved Philippians! You, Friendship Presbyterian Church, have shared with *me* and with Lisa in the gospel for these six and half years.

Thinking back to the passage, notice how *personal* Paul's appreciation is:

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. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:7-8, NRSV)

For Paul, this love is real, this compassion powerful. It is deeply rooted in his heart, founded on indelible memories of shared service and sacrifice, of mutual laughter and tears. This love and compassion is *just* as real for *me, today*. It was over six years ago that I first came to you as your Interim Pastor, with work to do. And those tasks of transition were undertaken, and relationships were slowly built, and we grew in love and trust of one another, and in the

fullness of time we discovered that we were meant to be together for much longer. That's when you called me to be your pastor, and Lisa and I left our long-time home in the Atlanta area to move to this wonderful, vibrant community and make this family of faith truly our own family. And that's exactly what happened. Over these last six years, you all have become family to us, and you have received us so, and have loved us as we have loved you. Lisa and I can say without hesitation that these have been the best years of our lives.

As your pastor, I have sat in your homes and at your tables, and by your bedsides in hospitals. You welcomed me in, and you let me into your heart. Three years ago, when my Lisa was at Piedmont for a month, in the ICU for four days, and we almost lost her, you never failed to reach out, and to pray for her and to pray for me. That's the kind of thing one never forgets.

I am grateful for so very much – for all these days we've shared, and for all of you. Knowing this church's rich heritage, I have long been aware of how we run this race as our forebears look on, cheering for us. To borrow language from the old spiritual, I sometimes tremble as I think about it – as we fulfil our own call now in view of the great cloud of witnesses ... All the people who have come and gone and come back to this place ... who have partaken of the Lord's Supper together and been baptized here ... who have been married here ... all the worship services and Christmas Eves and Easter Sundays ... all the activities, dinners, fellowship times, classes, and service projects that have happened here or been planned here. And all those whose lives have been finally commended to the eternal embrace of a loving God.

It turns out that I have served as the 11th installed pastor at Friendship (we had a few *interim* pastors along the way too, including me!). And I am grateful to have been joined in ministry by so many others, like those who have served faithfully as Elders, as members of Session and on various committees and task forces.

I can't praise highly enough the indispensable and indomitable Donna Rigsby, our office administrator, who keeps everything running smoothly and keeps me on track, and has been such a spiritual support too.

And I'm grateful for Kevin and Nan, whose friendship and partnership with me has been so appreciated, and who lead the best choir, pound for pound, that you'll find anywhere – along with making possible additional music to enrich our life together through the Friendship Community Choir and special music like the Hibbs Family Band and the Athens Chamber Singers and the Athens Recorder Ensemble. What a ministry!

I have been grateful and humbled by the long-time faithful service of Maurice preparing communion every month, and for these many years him being just about the first person a worship attender here sees – and that is a very, very good thing!

And I'm grateful for the Friendship Presbyterian Preschool which continues its wonderful work, coming a long way from its 15 students in 1966, to more than 110 today, under the outstanding leadership of Susanne Hayes. It's always been our goal in the Preschool that the children who

come here know this place as a joyful place, a place where they know that they are loved, valued, and celebrated. And they get this message supremely through the best teaching staff any preschool, anywhere, could hope for. It has been an honor and a privilege to be in the company, daily, of such loving and faithful disciples of Jesus.

And I'm grateful for all the ways in which Friendship church members and friends have helped to make an impact in this area through outreach. The life of discipleship expresses itself supremely through service, and in Christ's name over the last several years, our mission efforts have taken many different shapes, and our partnerships have varied, working with and supporting the YWCO Girls Club, the Oconee County Food for Kids program, the Bigger Vision Homeless Shelter, One Great Hour of Sharing, Presbyterian Homes of Georgia, Presbyterian Student Center at UGA, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, and many, many more.

But of course, we have especially been connected to ACTS (Area Churches Together Serving), an organization headquartered in Bogart which brings many area churches together to provide material and emotional support for those with emergency needs in our community. And I can't tell you adequately how grateful I have been for the ministry and leadership of Caren Snook is championing this vital work.

And I'm grateful for the partnership that Friendship Church has long had with Scouting. Boy Scout Troop 149 has been chartered to this church for 65 of our 77 years. There were 9 scouts in the troop back in 1959 when it was first chartered under Scoutmaster Starr Lee, and like our Preschool, it has come a long way and made a big, big difference in the lives of so many.

Today, Oconee County Troop 149 is one of the largest and most active troops in the Cherokee District, our 9-county area, and also provides leadership at the Cherokee District and Northeast Georgia Council level through adult volunteers. In its history, about 140 young people from our Troop have earned the rank of Eagle Scout – *the great majority* of them since 1994, under the incomparable 30-year leadership of Scoutmaster Paul Matthews, who himself is stepping down next month after faithful leadership for so long that has made such a difference for so many. We also celebrate our *Cub Scout Pack* 149 too has also been around for decades, offering many opportunities for younger boys to grow and learn. And our newest troop for girls, Troop 5149, chartered just two years ago, is growing and has a bright future!

And now looking back at my own time, I have filled this pulpit every Sunday, and have sought to bring a fresh word, informed by study, and, I hope too, with a splash of humor. I have taught nearly every Sunday morning before worship in the Friendship Room, eagerly looking forward to being with some of my dearest friends in Marks, Ted, Dori, and Sarah. And I have had the special duty and sacred honor of walking with some of you as you lost dear family members and friends, and of pronouncing the final blessing of God over irreducibly precious lives like Peggy Frantz, Frances Wilson, Anne Lee, and Chester Lee, who – together with several others – will be in my heart forever, having left a mark that can never be erased.

I am indeed so grateful, and for so much. What a journey it has been. Over this past week, as I reflected on this, my mind kept going back to a song by the Eagles. Even now, I can hear it in Glenn Frey's voice,

*A perfect day, the sun is sinkin' low
As evening falls, the gentle breezes blow
The time we shared went by so fast
Just like a dream, we knew it couldn't last
But I'd do it all again
If I could, somehow
But I must be leavin' soon
It's your world now*

It's *your world now* in the sense that I won't be involved in your next steps, as I step aside to make way for new, fresh leadership. But you are not alone. Your partner and ally in these days to come is none other than God, who is far, far from done with you. Your days of ministry and mission, of making a difference in this community and beyond, are slowly being unfolded before you as an unexplored but rich country, in which the Spirit's promise *will* come to pass, that "the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6, NRSV).

I *know* this, for you live up to your name: *Friendship* Presbyterian Church. You love people as they are. You extend the hand of welcome to those rejected by some, and you open doors that elsewhere have been shut, whether for the color of skin, or for what people believe or not sure they believe, or for whom they love.

The winds of the Spirit are blowing, and just as these winds moved over the primordial chaos at the beginning of time – stirring up and calling forth new creation – they move now and are bringing into being something new ... new, here in Athens, Georgia ... new in my own life ... something good, something life-giving, something surprising in its power and irresistible in its grace.

Perhaps this newness scares you some. I would be lying if I said I didn't scare me sometimes. But somehow, we trust it, you and I. We've seen enough in our lives to know to trust it. And so, it's time for me to go, but we part from one another commending one another to the love and care of the One who always held us, and always *will* hold us, together "in his hands."

And so, my parting prayer for you is the same as that prayer which Paul prayed for his beloved community in Philippi:

that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

With that prayer of promise and hope, I say – more deeply than I have ever said it before – that I am grateful to have been on this journey with you, and that in all the days to come you all will remain forever in our hearts as beloved friends and partners in Christ.

To the Glory of God! Amen.