

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who unites us in His Gospel, Christ Jesus, Our Lord, amen.

Paul's letter to the Church in the Macedonian city of Philippi is one of my favorite books of the Bible. It was certainly Saint Paul's most joyful letters. The unbridled joy Paul has when thinking about the Saints in Philippi is perhaps a bit surprising since Paul says he's writing this letter from behind bars in prison. I certainly wish I had the ability to be so positive when the chips are down in my life... Scholars aren't quite certain exactly when this letter was penned, but if it was when Paul was in the prison in Ephesus, then it would have been about 54 to 55 AD. If it was when he was in prison in Rome it would have been perhaps 5 or 6 years later, so maybe around 59 to 60 AD. Paul had established the Church in the city of Philippi and this became the first church in Europe. It was located in modern day Greece. The city of Philippi was founded around 450 years BC by Philip II, Alexander the Great's father. It was later conquered by the Romans and converted into a Roman City, which is who ruled during the time of Paul.

When I read about the early Church I wonder how they survived. How'd they keep their faith alive when they see the missionaries and Apostles like Saint Paul thrown in prison and even killed. The church at Philippi was one of many new churches being established by Paul and other missionaries and Apostles. As a new church in a world that didn't like such a dramatic change, hearing stories of

the missionaries' imprisonment, beatings, and even executions must have been terrifying. Even though their founder was in prison and his fate unknown, once you see the truth for yourself, you can't unsee it. So, how would they continue in the face of such trials? From prison, Paul wrote to the Philippians. He encouraged them in their work. He spoke with grace and courage, even as his own fate was all but cast in stone. He lifted them up and pointed to other models of leadership that were doing God's work boldly despite the danger. Paul's gift to the people was in the way he modeled grace under pressure with his words and his attitude. He maintained his composure and he continued the work, looking out for the Philippians even as his own life was in grave danger.

One of the best gifts we can give others is to model faith. Our words are empty if they are not backed by our actions. When I went on my Via de Cristo weekend, which is the Lutheran version of the Methodist Walk to Emmaus, I learned a catch phrase that simply says, as Christians we must not just talk the talk, but also walk the talk. Sometimes our words aren't even necessary if our actions speak our truth. Still, the more authentic and honest our words, the more impactful they will be. Modeling faith takes practice. Like anything else in life the more you try the better you get... With practice, living out our faith can become second nature. We can live our truth and others will be changed by what they see.

Over the years as a Pastor, I've had the privilege of sitting with several families as they wait for their loved one to pass. It's a sacred honor that I don't take lightly. One thing always stands out when I know the person is a Christian is they aren't afraid of death. They almost look forward to being released from this life to move on to the next. Christians don't cry out for more time or blame God for taking them. They have quiet confidence that their savior is waiting for them on the other side. Of all the times in our lives when the witness of the Christian is able to influence others, the time of our death is perhaps that one time when our actions really do speak louder than our words.

I'm not saying that our actions through out our lives are less important. The way we live our lives from Baptism onward show others what we believe and in whom we trust, but I think the way Christians react to and understand their mortality is the biggest example of how we can show grace under pressure, like Saint Paul did when he faced his uncertain future. He held close to his trust in Jesus Christ and even while being under the threat of execution, he was still concerned about the Church he started in Philippi. I can only imagine how his words must have encouraged that fledgling congregation as they watched in horror as their founder was imprisoned and eventually put to death by beheading outside the city of Rome. They were, I'm sure, watching every move he made to see if his words matched his actions.

How do your words line up with your actions? Do you reveal by your actions where your trust is placed? Of course they do! For good or for bad our actions always speak louder than our words... Paul's grace and confidence in the face persecution served the Lord by encouraging others. His actions helped the Church at Philippi to grow spiritually in their own walk with Christ by seeing how Paul walked through his time of trial. In this text we have for today, Paul says he prays for the Philippian Congregation even though he's hundreds of miles away. He's showing them and us the Church isn't just about us and our cozy little gathering here in beautiful Pitsburg Ohio, the Church is global, and Paul cared what happened to other Christians, even those far away, even while facing trials of his own.

How can we show our caring for all Christians, even those far away? How do we demonstrate our partnership in the Gospel with members of Christ's Church who are different from us or are far away from us? We have been taking up a collection every week for our own missionary in Poland, Jodi Hessler. We've already sent two substantial gifts to her organization earmarked directly for Jodi. Because of your generosity we are in partnership with her in the work she's doing to advance the Gospel of Jesus Christ half a world away in Poland. Another way we've been demonstrating our love for others and our partnership in the Gospel with those who are far away is through our Benevolence offerings that you

generously give every week. In the past, those gifts have gone into a black hole called the ELCA and nobody really knew where the money went. About 6 months ago the Church Council voted to allow us to designate our Benevolence offering to special causes instead of giving it all to the ELCA as undesignated giving. Since then, I've been working with Diane Warner, our Benevolence Treasurer, to purchase specific gifts through the ELCA Good Gifts Catalog. For example, we've purchased farm animals like chickens, pigs, and cows for impoverished families in South America and Africa. We've contributed to digging wells in some of those same villages where clean drinking water was previously not available. We've even invested in technology to bring irrigation from those wells to the farmers who need the water to grow their crops. I'm really excited to see some of the ways we've been able to walk the talk with our Benevolence funds. If you're interested in what we're doing and how we're spending that money, we have copies of the ELCA Good Gifts Catalog on the communications table across from the office. If you have a heart for one of the Good Gifts in that catalog, please let me or Diane know, and we'll try to work in your request for the next quarter when we do the shopping. Special thanks goes to Diane who has spent many hours figuring out how to distribute and spend those funds.

I could go on and give you many more examples of how this congregation, by our actions, proclaim our trust in Jesus Christ, just like Saint Paul did in our text

for today. This Church isn't just a club where we gather to talk about Jesus.

We're his actual body here on earth. I know others look to the Church to see if we Christians believe what we preach.

May we always follow in Paul's footsteps by reaching out to those who might be falling away or faltering in their faith. May we through our actions show the greater community how much we trust in our Savior. When our day comes to make the transition from this life to the next, may we remain steadfast in our faith and trust in our Lord Jesus Christ and the promises of our loving and living God for life eternal with God and all the saints who have gone before. May you be encouraged in your faith until that day when Jesus calls your name to join him in eternity. Until that day, I will always remember you in my prayers and give thanks for the partnership we have in spreading the Good News of God's love. Thanks be to God! Amen.