

The Loved and Loving Community

Philippians 1:3-11

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best.

Paul's letter to the Christian community at Philippi is a love letter. He loved this community deeply. Paul wrote from jail, though we don't know where. The Philippian Christians had been praying for him and had sent him a gift by way of Epaphroditus, one of their members. Paul wrote to thank them not only for this gift, but also for the gift of being the kind of community they were.

Here was a community aware of what it was called to be. They really believed what Paul had told them about following the living Christ, about being new creations in God's love, about loving with God's own love. There were difficulties, challenges, tensions—all the things that we encounter as we try to be in community with one another. But this community seemed able to meet these with a clear and focused commitment to working things out in the spirit of Christ.

For Paul, the Philippian community epitomized what the community of Jesus was to be. Whatever their struggles, whatever challenges they faced, they had an overriding spiritual centeredness. They kept clear who and what they were called to be as a community of the living Christ. They weren't trying to be an impressive religious institution, but a community with the mind and spirit of the servant Jesus Christ (2:1-11).

Two things in today's reading disclose what Paul saw in this community that enabled it to be the kind of community it was. I lift up these dimensions or aspects of Christian community so that we can see our own life in relation to them. I sense similarities between the community Paul felt the Philippians to be and the community of the Church of the Covenant through the years and today. Paul's words are an affirmation and an encouragement to us to continue in this way of life.

God Is Doing Something Through Us

First, Paul expresses confidence that "the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion in the day of Jesus Christ." It was God who began to do something in and through you, says Paul. Being the church, a community of Christ, wasn't your idea. You were

called into being by God. Remember and stay in touch with this reality. Your life is not your own making. It is about God doing something in and through you, and your being continually aware of it.

The Church of the Covenant began out of this sense of being called into being. Bev Cosby and others felt that God wanted to create a different kind of church, a community focused on discipleship to Jesus Christ through deepening commitment to one's own spiritual life and what God was calling each person to do with her or his life and gifts. This was expressed as Covenant Membership. The practice has been that each year those who are Covenant Members, and now Community Members, review their readiness to continue with their commitments for another year. Is God still calling me to this life? Am I living out of a sense of being called, or am I coasting on obligation or habit? Here is the sense that the Christian life is not automatic but a matter of the call of God in our lives and our response to it. If no Covenant Members would recommit for another year after examining themselves, then the Church of the Covenant would cease to exist.

For the most part, this awareness of God's doing something in and through us has been the prevailing awareness. However, there are always tendencies that detract from it—the feeling of obligation to continue a commitment or falling into the attitude that we "have to" keep something going, even if we don't experience God's call to it. We need always to be conscious of these very real tendencies so that we can make sure that we are living out of the freedom of and trust in God's call.

Paul is talking about keeping alive our awareness of something being done through us, not something we are accomplishing on our own steam. This awareness calls us to cultivate openness and detachment. Clearing out the things that get in the way of seeing and responding to God's presence and movements in us. Practicing detachment from our desires to control things, to appear successful, or anything else that puts the focus on us and not on God's presence and working.

For this reason a consistent inward journey is essential, doing the spiritual work of perceiving and letting go of things so that God has room to be in and move through us. It means looking at our ego-centeredness, whether it is our pride or our preoccupation with our failings or weaknesses. It means growing in our capacity to be inwardly quiet and listen to our inner life and what is going on there. It means growing in our ability to let go of distractions and obstacles to God's working through us—fear, guilt, anger, hurt, anxieties, and the like. The

inward journey is how we stay in touch with God who is doing a good work in and among us.

Our individual and corporate practice of the inward journey are interrelated and mutually strengthening. As a community we practice awareness of what God has been doing, is doing, and wants to do through us. We need to be careful not to load up our life with lots of projects, especially when no one is really called to them. Just being busy is not what God's doing a good thing through us is about. It is not about what or how much we accomplish but whatever it is that God wants to do through us. Paul encourages the Christians at Philippi in the deepest way: God began to do something good through you, and you can trust that God will keep on doing it and will bring it to fulfillment.

Love Filled With Wisdom and Insight

Then Paul prays that the love that is already at the center of this community will overflow with knowledge and insight so that they can perceive what is best, what God is leading them to be and to do in each situation. The love spoken of in Christian scriptures—*agape* in the Greek—is not emotions or feelings, at least not primarily. It is the way we relate to others and ourselves, the way we act in community, the way we live our lives in relation to God, others, and the creation itself. Love as feelings, even noble feelings like empathy and compassion, is not enough. Our loving needs to be made real and mature and effective by our gaining of knowledge, or wisdom, and insight, or understanding. This enables us to discern what is best in each situation, with each person or experience or challenge. Not what WE think should be done but what God's spirit enables us to perceive as best in terms of love.

This kind of love is hard work! It means that we are to encounter each experience, person, or challenge with fresh vision, asking what it means to love in this situation. For example, God's love is unconditional, it is true. And yet, unconditional love does not mean there is no accountability. We hold ourselves and others in the community accountable for growth in the life of love as embodied in Christ. All of Paul's letters deal in some way with this accountability in the life of love. Later in this letter, Paul strongly reminds two women in Philippi who are in conflict to be "of the same mind in the Lord." Every community to which he wrote had experiences of hurtful, neglectful, or unloving actions of its members. These, Paul felt, needed to be dealt with. This was what it meant to be accountable as a community loving with wisdom and insight, knowledge and understanding. Otherwise love would not be real and growth in love, in Christ, could not happen.

Love is not love in general or in principle, but love in the particular reality that is before us, the person or situation that is given to us. We have to work out for ourselves what is the truly loving thing to do. What is the most loving thing in this situation? What is it about this situation or person that I do not yet fully understand? In Buddhism, loving kindness, the supreme quality of human life, is gained through deep understanding and insight. Paul is saying the same thing. We are to live our lives and our life together out of the fundamental call to love. Yet we do not know beforehand what the loving action is for any given relationship or situation. We must become discerning, look deeply, and open the eyes of our minds as well as our hearts.

A Harvest of Righteousness

The reading ends with Paul saying that this kind of love, full of knowledge and insight, will produce a harvest of righteousness in Jesus Christ for the glory of God. We don't really cozy up to this word "righteousness" these days! It has come to be associated with self-righteousness and religious bigotry. But in this context, and indeed the whole of scripture, the righteousness of human beings comes as a by-product, if you will, of lives that are committed and open to God and the life of love. Being self-consciously righteous is to be avoided. Righteousness is like humility—if you think you ARE, then you AREN'T!

Righteousness means right relationships with God, other human beings, and the creation. For Paul, this kind of righteousness comes through living with awareness of God's doing something good through us AND making our lives channels of God's work by loving with wisdom and insight. It is not something we achieve but something in a sense bestowed upon us. Righteousness has to do with our being alive to God in the present moment, the present situation. It is not a matter of legalism or moralism, but growing in our capacity to love with knowledge and insight and wisdom.

May we hear and be encouraged by these words from Paul as though they were written to us. God has begun to do a good work among and through us. God is bringing it to fulfillment. Our spiritual work is to keep faithful to the inward journey that makes us sensitive and open to God's presence and working among us. We are to continue being a community centered on love that grows in wisdom, knowledge, insight, and understanding, so that we discern what is best in each situation, each moment, each challenge. As we remain faithful to being this kind of community, then the fruits of righteousness will abound. Our life will continue to point, not to ourselves, but to God.