

## *Action figures: Timothy*

### **Philippians 2:19-24**

Wayne Eberly

November 24, 2019

The setting for a Thanksgiving sermon is perfect this morning. Before us is our Harvest Table, adorned with symbols of God's bounteous blessing, and arranged with an attention to detail that brings out the richness and colors and shapes and sizes so that this vibrant display practically calls us to offer resounding words of thanksgiving. We are in the safety and security of this sanctuary, where many precious memories have been shared over the years. We have a roof over our head. We have walls to block the wind. We have pews in which to sit. We have heat to guard us from the weather on this cold and brisk autumn morning. And we have Paul's glowing letter to the church in Philippi, a letter filled with affirmations and encouragements and gratitude for his dear friends, the Philippians.

Philippians is a testament to true and undying thanksgiving. Comparing our situation this morning to that of the Apostle Paul, who wrote Philippians, is a study in contrasts. Paul was in prison. For the sake of contrast, let's just assume prison was not a pleasant place to be. If we had set designers, maybe we could capture a bit of what it was like for Paul. Let's remove the Harvest Table. Say goodbye to all that squash and those onions and apples, the celery stalks and the root vegetables, the pumpkins and the potatoes, yes, the multitude of potatoes that seem to have multiplied here in the halls of our church. Take it all away. Paul is in prison, and there ain't no Harvest Table in prison. While we are at it, let's just eliminate the other Thanksgiving staples that Paul did not have. No turkey, no stuffing, no gravy, no pies, apples, peaches or pumpkin pie, no cranberry sauce, no creamed corn, and with apologies to Dorcas, not even the Green Bean Salad she made famous. Take that all away. Now Paul, you don't have the Harvest Table. What you got Paul? Do you still have thanksgiving in your heart?

But we're not done. The set designers would not only remove the Harvest Table, they would also shrink the room. The walls would come closing in until this was just a small prison cell. There would still be a roof over his head, but it would hang low over Paul's head. Not that our pews are the most comfortable seats in the world, but I mean to tell you they are a whole lot better than what Paul had to sit on in his prison cell. And heat? Heat? No, Paul would have had little protection against the bitter cold of a long winter's night. Paul was in prison. What you got Paul? Do you still have thanksgiving in your heart?

And unlike the setting of last week's biblical passage, where Paul and Silas were in jail together in Philippi, now Paul is in jail, but he is not in Philippi and he is not with anyone. We don't know exactly where Paul was imprisoned, but he was likely far removed from the ones who had become such dear friends. And from the introduction Paul gives to the letter to the Philippians, he is not only miles away from his dear friends in Philippi, he is all alone in that prison cell. Paul, you are far from your friends, you are all alone, you are in prison, and you got no Harvest Table. You don't have any of that. What do you have Paul? What do you have? Do you still have thanksgiving in your heart?

What does Paul have? Read Philippians. Can a man who is alone and in prison, far from his beloved church family, cut off from all creature comforts, can a man in that situation have thanksgiving? Read Philippians. The answer is yes. Paul has thanksgiving because instead of focusing on what he does not have, Paul's focus is on what he does have. What Paul does have is his people. They might not be there with him in his prison cell, but they are with him in his heart. And because his people are in his heart, his heart is full of thanksgiving. Interestingly enough, maybe his setting, maybe being all alone in prison and far away from loved ones actually contributes to the poignancy of this powerful epistle. Paul's heart is full of thanksgiving, and his heart is full of tender remembrances. Maybe a place like prison, maybe being separated from loved ones does that to you. We don't know exactly how it came to be, but when Paul got around to writing to the Philippians, to the church in Philippi, his words were filled with warmth and affection. In that prison cell, as he wrote to his friends in Philippi, Paul was thankful for his people.

First and foremost, Paul was thankful for Jesus. Jesus was the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd said he would lay down his life for his sheep. Paul, one of those sheep who belonged to Jesus, imprisoned in a cold and dark prison cell, Paul knew his Good Shepherd was with him. Maybe it was in a prison cell, maybe in that very prison cell, that Paul started to think about what it meant to belong to Jesus. Maybe it was in that very prison cell that Paul formed the words he would one day write to another church, to the church in Rome. “I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38,39) In that prison cell Paul was thankful for his people, and the person who was most important among all his people was the person named Jesus. In that cold and lonely prison cell, when Paul penned that letter to his dear friends in Philippi he wrote, “Paul...a servant of Jesus Christ.”

Actually, that is close to what Paul wrote but not quite what Paul wrote to his dear friends in Philippi. What Paul actually wrote lets us know that along with Jesus, who is the most important person in Paul’s life, there was another person who held a special place. These are Paul’s actual words as he begins his letter to his dear friends in Philippi. “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus...” Who is this Timothy whose name Paul attaches to the greeting he gives his dear friends in Philippi?

Timothy is yet another “action figure” we meet in the Book of Acts. In Acts 16 we read, “Paul came...to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. The believers...spoke well of him.” (Acts 16:1,2) From that moment on Timothy traveled with Paul. Not long after that Paul arrived in Philippi, where on recent Sundays we heard of Paul’s encounter with the woman named Lydia, the dealer in purple cloth, as well as the prison where Paul and Silas were praying at midnight. Timothy was there. Timothy was with Paul in Philippi.

Timothy was with Paul when Paul wrote many of his letters. Second Corinthians, Colossians, and I and II Thessalonians are other letters in which Timothy is named with Paul in the writing of the letters. Furthermore, Timothy even receives two letters from Paul, letters appropriately named I and II Timothy. In I Timothy Paul writes to Timothy “my true son” and in II Timothy he writes to Timothy “my dear son”. Knowing all this we are in a position to hear Paul’s heartfelt words about Timothy, words that are in the second chapter of the letter to the Philippians. “I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.” (Philippians 2:19-24) Timothy is Paul’s dear son, his true son, a son who has worked alongside Paul sharing the gospel. Paul has no one else like Timothy. Timothy looks out for the interests of Jesus Christ. A person like that, a person like Timothy, how can you not give thanks for someone like Timothy. In that cold and lonely prison cell, Paul wrote his dear friends in Philippi to give thanks for Timothy. Paul had no one else like him.

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, I wonder if in your heart you understand what Paul is saying when he writes about his dear son, his true son, the one named Timothy. Has someone been a mother or father to you in the faith? Has someone adopted you in faith, taken you under their wing, embraced you with a love that would not let go? Last Sunday night we had a presentation on adoption that was well informed, thoughtful, compelling, and passionate. The presentation was given by April Dinwoodie. April’s presentation was well informed, thoughtful, compelling, and passionate, and it was touching. April told how Tom and Sandi Dinwoodie adopted her into their family. Adoption can be a thing of beauty, and to hear April speak, and to hear Sandi say back to her, “We love you April”, well, it doesn’t get any better than that.

Paul is talking about the adoption of faith when he talks about Timothy being his true son and his dear son. But the adoption of faith is bigger than just two people, bigger than just Paul and Timothy. Paul knew that. In his letter to the church in Rome Paul talks about the adoption of faith. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Our sin separates us from God, but at just the right time Christ Jesus dies for our sins. Sin causes death but Christ brings life. That journey from death to life is symbolized in baptism. As we go under the waters of baptism we die to our self, to our old self. When we rise from the waters of baptism there is new creation. We become children of God, children who are filled with God's Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. And in Romans 8 Paul wants us to know that the Spirit we receive is not a spirit who makes us slaves but the Spirit who set us free. "The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption as God's child. And by the Spirit we cry, *Abba, Father*. The Spirit himself testifies that we are God's children." (Romans 8:15, 16) The adoption Paul and Timothy have, an adoption where Paul can say of Timothy you are my true son, my dear son, is an adoption that belongs to all of us who have been baptized into Jesus Christ. Paul can be sitting in a cold and lonely prison cell, but his people are with him. Jesus Christ is with him. Timothy, his adopted son in the faith is with him. And because of that Paul is able to give thanks.

Let me say this again, on this Thanksgiving Sunday, I wonder if in your heart you understand what Paul is saying when he writes about his dear son, his true son, the one named Timothy. Has someone been a mother or father to you in the faith? Has someone adopted you in faith, taken you under their wing, embraced you with a love that would not let go? Florence Madison helped this church get started some 75 years ago, first with a bible study and later when we chartered as a church in 1950. Florence died in September. I had the privilege of visiting Florence many times in the few years we have been part of Dunn's Corners. Florence told stories of this church that made you feel like you could go out and conquer the world for Christ. One of her favorites was a story about having a small organ in the upstairs of her house that was on the corner of Post Road and North Stuart Street. In that upstairs part of the house a girls choir would come and practice, with Florence playing the organ and leading the choir. Florence claimed no musical talent, but the kids needed an organist and a

director and so she did what she had to do. She loved to tell how her son Bob, in his playpen would stick his head out and watch the girls sing. Bob is now nearing 70 years of age. This was a long time ago.

Florence always would say, “Joyce Morris was in that choir.” The first year we went Christmas caroling with Dunn’s Corners we went to sing for Florence. She lit up as we sang those beautiful Christmas songs of faith. And one of the carolers, a woman who was older than most of us, got down on her knees at the feet of Florence. That woman was Joyce Dionne. Joyce Dionne used to be Joyce Morris. With tears in her eyes Joyce told about what a difference Florence made in her life, and in the life of our church...our church, this church, the Dunn’s Corners Community Church, Presbyterian. O friends, the Spirit of adoption is strong in this family of faith. Knowing that, I pray we will be able to join our hearts to give thanks to God on this Sunday of Thanksgiving.

When you understand the adoption of faith you realize what a precious gift we have been given. Circulating on Facebook this past week was a picture of the cutest little girl you could imagine. She is riding a brand-new bicycle. She has a smile that could light up the darkest night. The picture is from one year ago, right after our Christmas Bazaar. The caption on the picture says, “And we have a winner!!! Won herself a bike at her school’s church Christmas Bazaar.” The little girl is Hazel Deniger. Last year Hazel was so confident she would win the brand-new bicycle we were offering in our raffle that she told her dad Jim, “We only need one ticket.” She was right. That one ticket won her the bicycle. That in itself is a sweet story. But there is more, so much more. A year ago, the caption said, “Won herself a bike at her school’s church Christmas Bazaar.” Now a year later, her school’s church is her church, and her family’s church. Last spring Jim, Bridgette, and Hazel Deniger joined our church family. On the day they joined Hazel was baptized. Hazel was adopted into the family of God and on this Thanksgiving Sunday, having this dear family as part of our family, and us as part of their family, what else can we do except join our hearts to give thanks.

The adoption of faith is such a beautiful thing. It is life giving. It is awe inspiring. One Sunday years ago I was performing a baptism for a family and their newborn child. All the children at church gathered at the front to watch the baptism up close and personal. I talked with the children about baptism and how it is a sign and symbol of God's grace, and how even though this little tiny baby couldn't even talk yet, they had already been surrounded by God's love. They already belonged to God. I talked about how baptism is a symbol of our belonging, our adoption into the family of God, and that we are all baptized into one family. I encouraged the children to be a friend to this precious little one as they grew up in our church family. Then I stood and walked over to the mom and dad and they handed me their child. I noticed one of the children from church had decided to get up and walk over with me. She had decided she was going to help me with the baptism.

It happened to be a young girl in our church with special needs. She didn't understand that she was supposed to stay seated and that I would go over and perform the baptism. She had heard me ask the children to be a friend to this new baby, and so she decided what better time to begin a friendship than the present. She walked up with me. It could have been awkward. But baptism is about belonging, about being a community, about every person having a place in the family. My friend Jordan stood with me and the family at the baptism that day, and afterward numerous people said it was the most meaningful baptism they had ever experienced. This girl with special needs knew she belonged in our church family. And she wanted her new friend, the child being baptized, to know that very same thing. These are the kind of things that work on your heart so that even if you are cold and alone in a prison cell, like that Apostle named Paul, your heart can still be filled to overflowing with thanksgiving.

As Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians, he was giving thanks for Jesus Christ and he was giving thanks for Timothy, his dear son and true son in the faith. And that is not all. Paul was writing the letter to the Philippians because he was thankful for them. Right at the beginning he writes, "I thank my God every time I remember you..." I love Philippians because it is a letter from a pastor to a church for which he is so grateful

he gives thanks every time he remembers them. I know a church like that. Oh yes, I know a church like that.

Joe Peacock was the founding pastor of this church back in 1950. A few years ago, Joe gave a financial gift to the church. He didn't say we had to use it in any particular way, but he did say if there was some project that would involve the church in ministries of racial reconciliation, crossing borders and boundaries, engaging the church with other cultures, he said that might be a meaningful project. This next summer our youth are traveling with some adults on a mission trip to Ghana. Crossing borders and boundaries to work with another culture, it just seems impossible that the trip won't help us take a step closer to racial reconciliation. I think Joe Peacock would be proud. I think Joe Peacock would say about Dunn's Corners, "I thank my God every time I remember you." I know that is how I feel. You see, Paul came to Philippi because he was a part of a sending church, the church in Antioch. The church laid hands on Paul, prayed for Paul, and then sent Paul. I love knowing that Dunn's Corners is a sending church. I love knowing we are sending youth and adults to another country, to another culture, to make friends with people from another country because we believe God's love is for the whole world.

I thank my God for the Dunn's Corners Church. I thank my God because this is a sending church, a church that believes God's love is for all people. I thank my God because this is an adopting church, a church that believes we are all united through the love of Jesus Christ and when someone joins with us or is baptized, they become our brothers and sisters. And I thank my God because this church is a church that loves Jesus Christ. Cold and alone in a prison cell, that didn't matter to Paul. Paul was able to give thanks. Paul was able to say about his dear friends at Philippi. "I thank my God every time I remember you." On this Thanksgiving Sunday, I want to be sure you hear these words from your pastor. "I thank my God every time I remember you." On this Thanksgiving Sunday, know that your pastor is thankful for you, my brothers and sisters in Christ.