

“Overflowing with gratitude”

Philippians 1:3-11

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During his time as the first Irish Catholic President of the United States, John F. Kennedy made a visit to Ireland. At one of the stops in that glorious land with such a rich heritage, he was present when someone shared a blessing for a child. The blessing touched the heart of the President.

I wish for you my child a heart that can be beguiled by a flower

That the wind lifts as it passes over the grasses after a summer shower

A heart that can recognize without aid of the eyes the gift that life holds for the wise.

When the storms break for you may the trees shake for you their blossoms down.

In the night that you are troubled may a friend wake with you so that your time is doubled.

And at the end of all loving and love may the man above give you a crown.

In a soft and quiet voice, JFK said, “I wish someone wrote that for me.”

I wish someone wrote that for me. That is how I feel when I read the letter that Paul wrote to the church in Philippi. From the opening words, “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi”, until the final blessing, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit,” I find myself continually thinking, “I wish someone wrote that for me.”

...I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

...It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart.

...This is my prayer: 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.

I wish someone wrote that for me:

...To live is Christ and to die is gain

...Your attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself.

I wish someone wrote that for me:

...Then you will shine like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life.

...I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.

...I want to know Christ—and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

I wish someone wrote that for me:

...Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

I wish someone wrote that for me:

...Do not be anxious about anything, but in prayer and petition present your request to God...and the peace God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

I wish someone wrote that for me:

...I can do all things through Christ Jesus, who strengthens me

I wish someone wrote for me:

...It was good of you to share in my sorrows.

All those beautiful and inspiring words written to one particular church. I read that treasured letter and say to myself, “I wish someone wrote that for me.” And do you know what? Do you want to know something that is absolutely amazing? Just like some believers in the

Roman Colony of Philippi sat together and listened to this letter the first time it was read, sometime back in the 4th or 5th decade of what we now call the Common Era, the Year of the Lord, AD 40 or 50, just like some believers nearly 2,000 years ago heard these inspiring words and said, “This letter was written just for me, just for us,” in the same way we who read this very letter now, we read this letter and we say, “This was written just for me, this was written just for us.” We read this letter like it is our letter, and the tone of this letter is filled with encouragement and affirmation, it resounds with a vibrant faith that holds fast to the belief that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us, it lifts the spirit of the discouraged in ways that allow us to join Paul in rejoicing always...and our hearts are quickened when he doubles down with joy, “Again, I say rejoice!” By the time he comes to the end of this warm and tender epistle, we are leaning in with deep affection as he says, “It was good of you to share in my sorrows.” When we read Philippians, we are partners with Christ, ones who share with Paul in a sweet and affectionate relationship that is a beautiful witness of what it means to belong to one another in the Body of Christ.

The tone of Philippians, a tone I am naming today as one that is overflowing with gratitude, is a tone that every church might wish to claim as its own, a tone that every church might wish to emulate, a tone that brings joy to the Body of Christ and is a warmhearted witness to the world.

I am thinking of the tone of Philippians, because during the early days of COVID, I wrote you a letter. I wrote you a letter as part of an ongoing series of letters when those early days of COVID caused us to enter a long and lonely season of isolation, a season when worship was canceled, a season when we spent Palm Sunday and Easter and Pentecost...alone, a season when we missed out on Communion and Coffee Fellowship, a season when we went without hugs and handshakes and singing hymns and sharing in the blessing of friendship and fellowship. In one of those daily letters, I wrote you over the span of 84 days, twelve entire weeks, I wrote one letter that asked the question,

“What is our tone.” I have identified what I consider the tone of the letter to the Philippians. The tone is gratitude. Considering our church, this wonderful fellowship of believers who make up the Dunn’s Corners Community Church, Presbyterian, as your pastor I asked the question, “What is our tone?”

One of the remarkable things about Paul’s letter to the Philippians, a letter overflowing with gratitude, is that Paul wrote the letter from the dark and dreary confines of a prison cell. If ever there was a time for the tone to turn sour, to wallow in pity, to be shaped by bitterness and loss...try writing a letter from a prison cell. And yet...and yet...that is exactly where Paul wrote Philippians, a letter whose tone overflows with gratitude. Because of that I should not have been surprised at what I discovered when I sought to answer the question, “What is our tone”? We were living under the cloud of COVID, living in a time of fear, facing the unknown. If ever there was a time for the tone to turn sour, to wallow in pity, to be shaped by bitterness and loss...try writing a letter during the dark, dreary, discouraging, dismal days of COVID. And yet...and yet...when I did that very thing, writing a letter about the tone of our church as the cloud of COVID covered us like a blanket of darkness...let me tell you what I discovered about our church as I answered the question, “What is our tone?” Let me tell you what I discovered when I answered the question, “What is Dunn’s Corners Tone?”

The tone of this congregation, the tone of you, the members and friends of this church, the tone of Dunn's Corners, the Dunn's Corners Tone during COVID was a tone that led my heart to be filled with gratitude. But what touched me in a profound way was not that the tone was a new tone...what brought such joy to my heart, what caused me to overflow with gratitude, is that the tone you had during the early days of COVID was the tone you have always had, since the first day we arrived...and as we have since learned, from the earliest days of this church. Back in those early days of COVID, God was at work in our life in a mighty way.

On Friday, March 13, in the year 2020, about 2,000 years since Paul sat stuck in a cell, we followed the guidelines and shut down the church. Boy, Sunday March 15 was a low day for me, wandering around in our empty sanctuary, missing each and every one of you. And the next Sunday...it should have been just as low and just as lonely, but by the next Sunday, this technologically challenged pastor of a church that had done just fine for 70 years without ever giving a thought to televising our worship services...we were able to broadcast a worship service. The way that came about fills my heart with gratitude. Mark Dodimead, one of our elders, said his son Kyle had lost his job when everything shut down, and his son Kyle just so happened to know how to film, edit, and produce video. By Thursday we recorded a service. Grace played. Andy and Kathy Koziol sang. I preached. And instead of being alone we were together...remote, yes...but we were together in virtual worship on Sunday, March 22.

From that Sunday in March until the middle of August, a stretch of five months, I preached my sermons to a camera operated by Kyle Dodimead. Just the two of us. After several weeks, I realized Kyle was not just filming. He was listening. In fact, he was worshiping. We began to talk about life and faith. At one point Kyle recounted the struggle he went through when he was diagnosed with cancer. He was in high school when he was diagnosed with cancer. I realized this young man had a deep faith that had been tested in the fire, and he came out strong.

In June or July Mark Dodimead told me he and his wife Dawn were moving to the Philadelphia area, and Kyle told me he was moving with them, I realized I did not want Kyle to move without us finding a way to thank him for all he did. I began to look at his camera equipment and ask questions and try to find out if there was a gift we could give him. I guess I tipped my hand when I started asking for prices. Kyle knew something was up. He said, "Wayne, if you want to do something for me, just pay it forward." I said, "What do you mean." Kyle said, "When I was going through my cancer, the Tomorrow Fund arranged for

me to take a special trip to see a Patriot's game, and it was such a blessing to do something fun, something I dreamed of my whole life. If you want to thank me, give a gift to the Tomorrow Fund. Maybe they will be able to help out another person struggling with cancer." Pay it forward. You rallied together as a church when you heard of Kyle's request, and on his last Sunday with us, we honored his service with a gift of \$2,200 for the Tomorrow Fund. That's the kind of thing that sets the tone for this church.

That one specific and particular example of the tone of this church had countless evidence to confirm the tone...from our Trustees steadfastly following all the guidelines to secure a Payroll Protection Loan (that was ultimately forgiven), we were able to keep our preschool funded and fully operating...and we were able to purchase our new sound system. That was a miracle in its own right because with a slowdown for COVID we were able to add a camera, and the Sunday Kyle left, Barb Paradise set up shop and we began livestreaming our services...and our Membership and Evangelism Committee took advantage of all the social distancing and isolation and did our pictorial directory in a relaxed and informal way that was fun and captured people doing the things they love to do...and our Warm Dinners became frozen, and that was okay...and the offerings of food for those in need poured in week after week for Jonnycake and Warm...and we provided rental assistance and housing. And then this little subculture of sewers began making masks...and the stories that came from the literally thousands of masks that this congregation produced...and when you discovered ones who faced particularly difficult times you mailed them Teddy Bears, with the little sign that says the Dunn's Corners Church is saying prayers for you...and you kept joining the church, new members kept joining...and some of our new members had babies...Nick and Jessica Schilke joined and before you know it their son Bryce was being baptized...Bryce, whose great-grandmother is Nancy Schilke, and whose great-great-grandparents are Henry and Calista Morris...and Jake and Sarah Longolucco joined and before you know it their daughter Hannah...well, today, on this day, when we are giving thanks for the

tone of this church, a tone of gratitude, we rejoice with a young family who has rejoiced in the birth of a beautiful daughter and the blessing of her receiving the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ.

All these things and more, so much more, were running through my mind when I asked myself the question back in the early days of COVID, “What’s our tone? What is Dunn’s Corners Tone?” And as I asked that question, I wrote you all a letter, on Day 56 of COVID, May 8, 2020. On that day I wrote you this letter.

Sitting on the desk in my home office is a commemorative coffee mug. The mug is from our church. The coffee mug has a peaceful picture of our church, the front of the church with the big cross that is displayed so prominently. Beginning my morning by looking at that coffee mug with such a peaceful picture sets the tone for my day.

I wonder if a church has a tone. We refer to a tone of voice, whether it is happy tone, a kind tone, a harsh tone, maybe a sarcastic tone. Does a church have a tone? I think a church does have a tone, and I am happy to tell you I like the tone of our church.

Recently Alex Houston said he had some friends who were struggling with the Coronavirus, including the wife, a nurse, who has tested positive. The husband reached out to Alex. Apparently, Alex makes an awesome corn chowder, and the husband was hoping as they faced this difficult time that Alex would make some of his corn chowder. When you face a crisis comfort food comes in handy. If you know Alex, you know he got right on it. He pulled out his recipe book that he uses to make his delicious corn chowder. It is a Cookbook put out by our church sometime in the 90’s with the title, “Recipes from the Plate.” He found the recipe for the Corn Chowder, and he noticed the recipe had been submitted by Betsy Jewell. Along with making the chowder for his friends, Alex asked if I might find a way to let Betsy know her recipe was still bringing not

only delicious soup to people, but also stirring some delightful memories. Guess what? As I read that email from Alex, I really liked the tone of his note.

That Wednesday, I wrote a letter to Betsy telling of what Alex had done. I drove over to the Royal, the Nursing Home where Betsy lives. I dropped the letter off for her at the front door. Without even knowing she did it, Betsy was one of the first friends who set the tone for me at Dunn's Corners. Unfortunately, soon after we moved to Westerly Betsy had some setbacks and had to be moved to a nursing home. I showed up to visit her. When the attendant at the front desk asked who I came to visit, and I told her Betsy Jewell, she practically broke down in tears. She said, "We all know Betsy. She used to come here all the time, visiting anyone who was sick or lonely. Betsy is the most amazing person." Does a church have a tone? I think so. I think a person like Betsy Jewell sets the tone, thinking of others, visiting, caring, and showing kindness.

Driving to the Royal Nursing Home that day, I thought of Peg Wolstencroft. Peg is now at the Royal. Peg and Sam Wolstencroft were founding members at Dunn's Corners. Peg helped set the tone. Before her health took a turn for the worse, Peg would drop by church on Tuesday afternoons. On Tuesdays Peg would have lunch at the Senior Center, and at the lunch they would always give her a cake to take home. Well, the cake never made it home. Peggy knew the youth group met on Tuesday nights, so every Tuesday afternoon she would drop off her cake for the teens. Peggy set a sweet tone at the church, and I mean that in more ways than one.

Barbara Green was also at the Royal. (Barbara has since died) A few months after arriving at Dunn's Corners, Dutch and Barbara asked me to come visit them at their home. I arrived at their home and Barbara greeted me with a big smile. She said Dutch had the car warmed up and wanted to take us all out to lunch. I climbed in and Dutch took me to the middle of nowhere. Literally. There is this

darling café somewhere on the way towards Providence that is called “The Middle of Nowhere” café. We had the best lunch. The smiling faces and warm welcome of Dutch and Barbara helped set the tone for our church, and it is a happy and friendly tone.

Florence Madison used to live at the Royal before she died. Among the many remembrances Florence would share about Dunn’s Corners, one stands out. Florence was deeply touched by Dutch’s dad, Ed Green, whose store at Dunn’s Corners was a fixture for many years. At some point on almost every visit Florence would think back on Ed Green and his store and say, “Ed Green carried a lot of people through difficult times.” I guess Ed Green extended credit. I’m pretty sure he did even more than that. Whatever Ed Green did, it set a tone that our dear friend Florence never forgot. I finished my letter to you that day, back in May of 2020, on Day 56 of COVID, I finished my letter to you that day with these words.

So here I start my day looking at my coffee mug with the picture of the cross on the front of our church, and I’m asking myself, “What is the tone for our church?” Then a pleasant thought comes to mind. What is Dunn’s Corners tone? That cross holds the key to the answer for what our tone is as a church. What is Dunn’s Corners tone? Let me spell that question just a little differently. I’m going to remove the space between Corners and tone. “What is Dunn’s Cornerstone?”

In Psalm 118, in words the early church grabbed hold of and claimed as the promise of Jesus Christ, the scriptures say, “The stone the builders rejected has become the Cornerstone.”

What is Dunn’s Cornerstone? Jesus is our Cornerstone, and his life of love sets the tone that lives in each one of our hearts.

**With the love of Christ,
Wayne**

Ah, when I read Philippians, a letter from a pastor whose heart overflows with gratitude for his faithful congregation, his loving congregation, his partners in the gospel, when I read Philippians, I say to myself, "I wish someone wrote that for me." And he did. That letter was written for me and for you and for all the saints who belong to Jesus Christ, to all who know that Jesus Christ is the Cornerstone and who know that when you build your life on Jesus you are building on the solid rock of faith. Today I want you to know Philippians is for us. I want you to hear your pastor say to you, to each and every one of you, "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now."