

“Then you will shine”
Philippians 2:12-18
Wayne Eberly
January 29, 2023

On the way to telling a beloved church that their lives shine like stars, Paul begins Philippians with a prayer of thanksgiving. “I thank my God every time I remember you...” I like that. On the way to telling this beloved church that your lives shine like the stars, let me begin with a word of thanksgiving. I hope I have told you over and over again how thankful I am for this wonderful congregation. At this moment, a time of transition for the church, I also want to thank one particular group of people, and that would be the staff of the Dunn’s Corners Community Church. The staff always play an important role in the life of the church, but even more so during a time of transition. When you see the staff, when you think of the staff, when you pray for the staff, when you interact with the staff, be ever watchful for the staff. Encourage them, support them, talk with them, listen to them, thank them, and love them. I know I sure love them...Gloryvette, our sexton, Christine Fish with our Early Learning Center and KidKare, Grace Urrico, Kathy Koziol, Amanda McLintock who has used her gifts to create a warm and welcoming environment for our children, Michael Walton whose leadership with the youth is so inspiring, Andy Wallace who has served this church for more than 25 years, bringing gifts for worship and the arts that create a joyful and sacred space for praise, reverence, and adoration, and Nancy Fortin, whose attitude in the office sets the tone for the entire church, giving selflessly of her time and energy. On the way to telling this beloved church that your lives shine like stars, like Paul I want to begin with a word of thanks.

On the way to telling a beloved church that their lives shine like stars, Paul informs that beloved church about a challenge he is facing. The challenge Paul was facing was that he was in chains. He was a prisoner. He was locked up in a cell. But right when you think Paul is about to start complaining about being a prisoner, he shares something marvelous. Paul, the captive, discovers he has an audience that is also

captive. The ones who are his jailers cannot get away from him, and so he preaches to them, and lo and behold, in no time everyone in the whole cell block is listening to Paul preach around the clock.

On the way to telling this beloved church that your lives shine like stars, I also feel compelled to tell you about a challenge I face. It is not a new challenge. It is not something that has become a recent hardship. No, this challenge I face is one I have had to endure my entire life. Although my challenge is nowhere near as difficult as being in chains, held captive in prison, neither has my challenge been easy. You see, I have a very high-pitched voice. This has produced countless moments of embarrassment. I cannot number the times I have been at a drive thru restaurant, ordering a Big Mac, a Burrito Supreme, some Colonel Sanders fried chicken, or an ice cold frosty mug of A&W root beer, and as I finish my order, I get asked the question I have come to dread. Over the speaker the person working the drive-thru window will ask, "Is that all ma'am?" I lower my voice as best I can, "Yes, that's all." Doesn't work! "Thank you ma'am. That will be \$5.49 at the window." When I get to the window, I realize I am not the only one embarrassed by the situation. The person at the window apologizes profusely, but it doesn't help. The damage has been done.

If it was only at the drive-thru it would be bad enough. But I am the volunteer chaplain here in town with the Dunn's Corners Fire Department. The Fire Department is right down the street from our church. I know all the firefighters. On the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend back in the year 2021, I was alone at church early on Sunday morning, getting ready for worship. All of the sudden, the fire alarm went off. I smelled something suspicious. I got out of the building in a hurry. I dialed 911 and reported the alarm had gone off. The 911 operator said, "Where are you calling from ma'am?" Ouch. While the operator gathered information about the situation at church, I lowered my voice as best I could, only to have the operator end the call by saying, "Remain calm ma'am. The fire trucks will be there soon." When the trucks arrived a few minutes later, with all the firefighters I know personally, they asked, "We received a call about a fire alarm. Where is the woman who placed the call?" I looked at them with a puzzled look

on my face. What did they mean the woman who placed the call. I placed the call...oh, I placed the call. When I told that to all my “friends” with the fire department, they all enjoyed a good laugh. Not one ounce of sympathy or understanding.

But when it comes to my high-pitched voice, I want to tell you, I might not get the last laugh, but I get the best laugh, or the happiest laugh. You see, back in the summer of 2014 I preached a sermon in which I confessed to the shortcomings of my voice. I told some of these very stories and their comical outcomes. Somehow that sermon caught the attention of a woman named Staci Heep, who was serving on the pastor nominating committee of a church in Westerly, Rhode Island. If you asked me at the time where Westerly was, I would have said, “Westerly? I don’t need to know where Westerly is. I don’t even know where Rhode Island is.” But Staci liked the sermon. Staci shared the sermon with the committee, the committee reached out, and in no time at all we knew exactly where Rhode Island, and Westerly, and especially where Dunn’s Corners is, and I have never been so thankful for my high-pitched voice. It played a part in getting us here, where for eight years our lives have been richly blessed.

So, on the way to telling this beloved church that your lives shine like the stars, I want to inform you that even the challenges of life, whether it is the chains of Paul or the squeak in my voice, even the challenges can turn out to bring some very meaningful blessings. At the same time, I don’t want you to think I am being silly about how these challenges can bring blessings. A mom and dad were looking for a place to hold the memorial service for their daughter, whose sudden and tragic death had shattered their world. The funeral director suggested they call the Dunn’s Corners Church. The funeral director paid you all a tremendous compliment. The funeral director told the father that the church would embrace them in their time of need. At the same time, the funeral director felt compelled to tell the father, “The pastor has a high-pitched voice, but he’s a good guy.” I knew the funeral director had recommended to the family that they call the church. I never knew the other part of the story, the part about my high-pitched voice, until we had dinner with Dan and Stephanie Potts last week. Dan couldn’t help

but break out in a big smile when he told me the part about the high-pitched voice. We all laughed.

But can I just tell you how that time of tragedy, when Maddie Potts passed away suddenly on the soccer field during her senior year in high school, can I just tell you how that was both a time of terrible sadness, and yet somehow, in some mysterious way that could only be the hand of God, somehow and in some way that time of sadness and grief brought us all to a realization that God is at work even in the deepest and darkest valleys we will ever walk. On the day of Maddie's memorial service, Dan Dickerman, Bill McCauley, Scott Berry, and many others were scrambling around getting our church ready to host a crowd that we knew could number in the hundreds if not thousands. The guys rigged up a sound system connected to the Fellowship Hall, took the sound out to the upper parking lot, and even down to the chapel in the Pines. Every pew was filled. In the choir loft were seated the members of the soccer team. Fellowship Hall had more than 100 chairs. The parking lot was crowded with people huddled together. And the benches in the outdoor chapel held the overflow from the overflow from the overflow. As the service wound down, as the service came to a close, we read the 23rd Psalm. We read the 23rd Psalm in the sanctuary. And those words of a shepherd who walks with us even through the valley of the shadow of death were piped into Fellowship, out onto the pavement of the parking lot, down to the benches of the chapel, and throughout the surrounding yards and homes of the community. With the recent dedication of the Maddie Potts Fieldhouse at Chariho High School, there are numerous signs, markers, memorials, and events that have come from that time of great loss. What we will always treasure here at Dunn's Corners is how after that memorial service, Dan Potts came and joined his life to the life of this church. The presence of Dan Potts has been a great gift to this congregation. I know Dan has touched my heart in ways I cannot begin to express.

Anyways, after giving thanks and after talking about how even something as difficult as being in chains has turned out to be for the good of the gospel, there Paul is, on his way to telling a beloved church that their lives shine like stars, and on the way to telling that beloved

church that they shine like stars he takes a moment to remind them that their attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. What was the attitude of Christ Jesus? Christ Jesus emptied himself. Christ Jesus became a servant. Christ Jesus humbled himself. Christ Jesus even gave his life away so that others, so that people like us, could have life. Here I am, on my way to telling this beloved church that your lives shine like the stars, and I'm like Paul. He reminded the people that they should have the same attitude as Christ. I want to tell you that so many times you have had that same attitude. You have had the attitude of Christ.

Jesus told us what his attitude was. "When you fed the hungry, when you gave a drink to the thirsty, when you clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, visited the sick or the prisoner...you did it unto me."

- When the sewing machines were humming and the quilters were quilting and comforters were being sent to shelters and dresses to girls from around the world, you had the same attitude as Christ.
- When floors were poured and walls were raised, when windows were installed and doors were hung with Habitat for Humanity, when keys were put into the hands of a family who once had no place to call home, you had the same attitude as Christ.
- When you helped to feed the ones who were hungry, whether it was WARM dinners, Christmas Dinners, frozen meals, gift cards for those in need, or a casserole when someone was grieving, or you prepared those warm and comforting collations for families who lost a loved one, you had the same attitude as Christ.
- When you welcomed...a visitor to church, a refugee family from Syria, or Ukraine, or the Congo, a child to Sunday school, a young person looking a for a place to belong, whenever and however you welcomed someone and helped them find a place of belonging, you had the same attitude as Christ.
- When you visited, when you called on the phone, when you wrote a letter to someone at a time of need, when you reached out to a person seeking a ray of light, a heart that was feeling sad, when

you visited or called or wrote someone just because you wanted them to know they were loved, you had the same attitude as Christ.

- When you listened, when you made time, when you cared, when you wept with those who wept, when you mourned with those who mourned, when you were gentle with those who were fragile, whenever you did any of these things, and whenever you did all of these things, you had the attitude of Christ. Whenever you did it unto the least of these, you did it unto our Lord Jesus Christ himself. Jesus said so.

Yes, on my way to telling this beloved congregation that you shine like stars, I want to give thanks for all the times you have had the same attitude as Jesus Christ, the attitude of serving and giving and sharing and loving. And while I am still on my way to telling you that you shine like stars, while I am still on the way but not quite there yet, I want to borrow yet again from the Apostle Paul and remind you never to forget to rejoice in the Lord...and I mean rejoice in the Lord always. I mean it. I will say it again. Rejoice in the Lord always.

- Rejoice when Grace gets that piano to come alive. Rejoice when she plays a melody that lifts your heart and sets your spirit soaring.
- Rejoice when the choir takes us down to the river to pray.
- Rejoice with every sounding of the bells, every cling, every clang, every note those joyful ringers rang.
- Rejoice with the children as they hunt for Easter eggs and climb into the tomb on Easter and light the candles of Advent and when they grab hold of our hearts with their faith, their trust, their innocence, and their gentleness, beckoning toward us as if to say, “Unless we become like the children we might well miss out on the kingdom of heaven.” Yes, rejoice with our children and our youth and embrace the visions God gives to them.
- Rejoice with every baptism.
- Rejoice with every memorial service, knowing that for the ones who die in Christ, they have been welcomed into a new home not prepared by human hands, but an eternal dwelling.

- Rejoice with every new believer, for every time a precious child of the Father in Heaven returns home the angels in heaven rejoice.
- Rejoice every time you enter this house of worship. Rejoice and sing with praise the words of the psalmist, “I was glad when they said unto me, ‘Let us go unto the house of the Lord.’”
- Rejoice because the Lord is near. Rejoice and do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Oh yes, on the way to telling you, the members and friends of this beloved congregation, on the way to telling you that you shine like stars, I just couldn’t miss the opportunity to tell you to rejoice in the Lord...always.

I know I will rejoice in the Lord...always...every time I think of you. I will rejoice and give thanks for your partnership in the gospel, and for sharing in that partnership with us for these eight beautiful and wonderful years. I will rejoice in the Lord always because your faith does shine like the stars in the universe.

One of the great joys we have discovered here in this marvelous little corner of God’s creation is that not only do we get to see the stars shine, we also get to experience the stunning oceans, oceans which do not shine, but boy do they sparkle. On a sunny day, when the wind is on the waters, when the waves are rolling just right, you can see the sun sparkle in a thousand tiny specks of light. And it is stunning. It is glorious. It is beautiful. And it is inspiring. One of the stories that never fails to fill my heart with emotion is about drops in the ocean that reflect that sparkle from the sun. The story captures perfectly the feelings I have for you, our dear and beloved friends at the Dunn’s Corners Community Church, Presbyterian.

A series of events led me to read a book about John F. Kennedy, a book that mentioned a line from a Broadway musical about King Arthur and that one brief shining moment. This series of events led to an afternoon when I was watching the film version of “Camelot.”

As the movie draws to a close, King Arthur is preparing to go to his final battle. His end is near. His beloved dream of Camelot has crumbled. The Round Table has been broken and shattered by betrayal and deceit. His kingdom lies in tatters. The future seems bleak. Strapping on his sword for what he knows will be the last time, the king hears a rustling sound near his tent. Arthur calls out, "Who goes there?"

With hesitation a young boy steps from the shadows.

"Who are you?" the king demands

In a small and timid voice, the boy says, "Tom, my Lord."

"And where do you come from?"

"From Warwick, my Lord."

Eyeing him warily the king probes, "Why are you here?"

Tom straightens up a bit and says, "I have come to fight for the king."

Not only does that answer surprise the king, you can see the king melt just a little.

"Fight for the king?"

"Yes, my Lord, I want to be a Knight of the Round Table."

Arthur asks, "And how did you decide on this extinct profession?"

What Tom says next floors the king. "From the stories people tell."

"From the stories people tell?"

"Yes, my Lord, from the stories people tell. Might for right, right for right, and a Round Table for all."

The cloud that hung so darkly over the king seems to disappear, just for a moment, just for one brief shining moment. Arthur calls the boy over to his side. Even though Arthur knows the battle he enters that day will end in defeat, he now sees that the story of Camelot might live on.

Speaking gently but urgently to the boy, King Arthur says to young Tom of Warwick,

"Listen to me, Tom, and do exactly what I, the king command you."

Expecting to be sent to the front lines, Tom stands at attention, awaiting his orders. But King Arthur says, "I want you to go home, to grow up, and to grow old." A look of disappointment fills Tom's face as the king says these words. Tom is ready for battle. Instead, the king says he wants Tom to go home and tell everyone that once there was a spot.

Slowly Tom begins to understand how important it is to tell the story. His disappointment in not going to battle is transformed and he prepares to run and tell the story. Before he does, the king has him kneel down. King Arthur places his trusted sword Excalibur on the shoulder of the young boy and says, "I knight you Sir Tom of Warwick." When Sir Tom of Warwick rises the king sends him off to fulfill his important task. The boy runs, literally carrying the hopes and the dreams of Camelot with him. Arthur watches him go with the sweetest look of wonder and amazement. He shouts after him, "Run, my boy, run."

Right about then Arthur's oldest and dearest friend, King Pellinore, stumbles onto the scene. Pelly sees the boy running. Pelly hears Arthur shouting. Confused by this strange series of events, Pelly blurts out, "Arthur, who was that boy?"

King Arthur, his face beaming with hope, shouts triumphantly, "One of what we all are Pelly, less than a drop in the great blue motion of the sunlit sea. But it seems, Pelly, some of the drops sparkle. Some of the drops do sparkle." The king shouts one final time, "Run, my boy. Run."

When we move to Houston, we will be a long way from the Atlantic Ocean. But every time I think of you, every time I think of our dear friends, every time I think of our beloved family here at Dunn's Corners Community Church, every time I think of you, every time I remember you, the ocean will not seem so far away. For in my mind, I will see drops of that ocean, drops that sparkle, drops that glisten, drops that glow, drops that shine with the joy, the faith, the hope, and the love of Jesus Christ. Some of the drops sparkle. Yes Lord, some of the drops they do sparkle.

So along the way to telling you, the members and friends of this beloved church, that your lives sparkle, I want to say once again that I will thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I will always pray with joy, because of the partnership we have shared in the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name we pray. Amen.