

I invite you to keep your Bibles open or to open the Bibles in the pews and follow along with me as we study Philippians 1:3-11 for a little bit. Verses 3-6:

*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, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

Yesterday was a day of joy like that! It was a wonderful time as we shared all the many things about our life together as a church that we appreciate, that we find meaningful, that give us a sense of purpose as a congregation. As one person said, it is wonderful to feel so good about who we are and what we are doing as a church!

Even if some things are not yet the way they should be – as is always true, since we always have more growing up to do as God’s people – there is joy that we can be partners together in sharing the Good News of Jesus, because that Good News declares the forgiveness of sins for sinners like us as well as new strength to come alive in new ways in the power of God’s Holy Spirit. This is Good News that continually transforms our lives. That is what gives us courage to declare with the Apostle Paul that even though we know we have a long ways to go, God is at work in us and God will complete that good work.

I like the way my German Bible translates this paragraph: *“Always when I pray for you, I thank my God that you have received the Good News and that the Good News has been working in you from the first day until now. That fills me with joy, when I pray for you all. I am completely certain: God will bring to fulfillment what he has begun among you, until Jesus comes.”*

Do you have that sense of excitement and anticipation – that God is at work in your life, in your spirit ... that the Good News is transforming you, raising you up out of sin and shame and doubt and fear, and giving you a new lease on Life with God, opening up new horizons in your spiritual life!? That’s what the Good News is meant to do – for all who become “partners in the gospel,” as Paul says.

The more I ponder the statement of purpose we came up with yesterday, the more I find it vibrant with meaning. If you haven't found your copy of it in your mail slot yet, you can get it after worship. *"The Annville Church of the Brethren is a family of Christians committed to following Jesus."* That's the simple, forthright first sentence. *"The Annville Church of the Brethren is a family of Christians committed to following Jesus."* And the second sentence celebrates our partnership in living out the faith: *"We are partners in Biblical teaching, compassionate service, peace witness, and joyful fellowship."* Partners! Working together ... to help each other learn from the Bible the ways of Jesus ... to get the work of Jesus done in compassionate service, in a witness for peace, and in joy-filled fellowship. The Risen Lord is continuing the work he began in us – he will fulfill the cleansing from sin and the new way of living that got started when we first decided to follow Jesus. How amazing it is that we get to be partners in this wonderful new Life with the Lord! Partnership is crucial!

Even as he sits in prison, Paul rejoices because he knows that his fellow believers share God's grace with him. Verses 7- 8:

*It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.*

*"Blessed be the ties that bind our hearts in Christian love,"* we sometimes sing. How wonderful to know that when we are going through struggles and trials, pains and problems, our brothers and sisters in the church family are holding us in prayer, continuing to believe with us that God's power is stronger than all the powers of sickness, sin, and death, and sharing with us what they can. The church in Philippi has sent gifts to Paul via Epaphroditus (Philippians 4:18); Paul knows they are thinking of him and praying for him. And he says that he longs for them *"with the affection of Christ Jesus."* The word for "affection" in the original Greek is literally "the bowels," "the gut." We know what it is like to have a gut level feeling. Paul is saying that he loves his fellow Christians with the gut level feelings of Jesus – the One who loved them so much that he died for them. Amazing depths of love that God designs to come from the core of our innermost beings!

May *your* love abound more and more! Paul concludes. Verses 9-11

*And 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 until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.*

Our purpose is to grow in love, more and more, loving so much that we want to learn more and to understand better – so that our love “*may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.*” Certainly the more we learn about God’s love for us and God’s desire to redeem us, even when we have been lost in sin – the more we will learn to love others, desiring that everyone be saved from self-destruction, vanity and pride. Our own struggles help us have compassion for others’ struggles.

It is not that we will love indiscriminately. Love does not turn a blind eye to the rot that is destroying the people we love. No, Paul’s prayer is that our love may abound in knowledge and depth of insight so that we may “*discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.*”

Initially, that was what this whole sermon was going to be about – the call to “*discern what is best.*” And then I realized that the whole passage builds up to this command – calling us to rejoice in the Good News that makes our lives right and that can make others’ lives right, too ... and to celebrate the love that hangs in there with people even when they are in prison, continuing to believe in the power of God’s grace to overcome all evils, ... and to love from our guts, with the very gut-level love of the crucified and resurrected Lord Jesus, with a love that continues to grow in knowledge and depth of insight, until we are finally able to “*discern what is best.*”

Discernment is a tricky thing. This week I received an email from a middle-aged friend. *Please pray with me*, he wrote. *I feel such a strong call to be of service but I don’t know how to discern exactly what the call is. I need clarity, and I want to make sure it is not just me wishing to have a call, but that it is really God calling me.*

How do you know? How do you discern such things? How do you know what your career should be? Or with whom God might want you to become friends? – It isn’t always the ones you think are the most cool or that you feel attracted to, you know – often God will call you to befriend the lost and forlorn. How do you know? How do you discern whether you should get married or not? Whether to bring children into

this world? Whether to change jobs? When to retire? What to do after you retire? Life is full of the need to discern.

A couple months ago I received a letter from Mallam Toma Ragnjiya, former President of Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria) saying that a group of young adult Brethren had come to Nigeria for a workcamp and I should please influence them and the leaders of our denomination to send them back to work with the church in Nigeria again. He had found them to be deeply Christian, committed to the work and mission of the church. And I was reminded of the many people with whom I have talked over the past several years about the call they have felt to mission work and what they might do about it. Two years ago I talked with a young couple at Annual Conference about their sense of being called to Africa. We prayed together. And now the news is out that they are going to Nigeria. Sometimes it takes a while to discern what the Lord wants for our lives.

What about you? What promptings of your spirit are you seeking to discern? How do you decide what it is that God wants to do in your life? In the life of our church?

I think our scripture passage gives us good guidance.

- (1) Pray for all of God's people. Rejoice in the partnership we share in the Gospel all around the world. God does not call you alone. You are called alongside thousands of other people. Each of us has our part to do. None of us is expected to do it all alone. Your promptings to care about people in Africa or in Iraq or in downtown Lebanon may mean that you are to go there and help make sure that lives get touched by God's love, or they may mean that you are to help support work that is going on there, as a partner in prayer and resourcing. We are called to varying levels of partnership. Pray about it.
- (2) Trust that God will work it out. *He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion.* If the Lord wants you to do something and if you are attentive to God in prayer, even if you don't respond to his call the first time, God can open the door again and again, and maybe a few windows as well. If you begin to notice a number of times that the same prompting of your spirit is triggered – God may well be inviting you to pursue that particular work opportunity or that particular relationship. My friend was trying to figure out whether it was his desire or whether it was God's desire that he might do

something in service ministry, and I responded that his own desire may be a means by which God is leading him. Sometimes the best thing we can do is to test a call by taking some small steps towards such a change in career or activities and then see whether it seems to fall in place or not ... that's one way of discerning.

- (3) Let what you feel you love, that you feel you are inclined to, be informed by what you can learn about it ... *that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.* As *The Message* translates the passage: *“Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover's life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of.”* As my NIV Study Bible notes says, *“Christian love is not mere sentiment; it is rooted in knowledge and understanding.”* Whether it is love for adventure or love for the opposite sex or love for what is familiar and dependable – pay attention to what God wants you to learn, from the teachings of the Bible and from the experiences of seasoned Christians who have followed Jesus a long time and become wise. Ask the people you respect to think things through with you; pray together; consider what is good, what is better, what is best.

*“Discern what is best,”* what will make you *“pure and blameless”* in God's sight. Now that's a tall order! But it is what Paul tells us to strive for. Not just to discern what will feel right to us, but to discern what will be right in God's sight, because we all must answer to God.

A prayer offered by minister Howard Thurman is a good one for us to pray: *“Give me the listening ear. I seek this day the ear that will not shrink from the word that corrects and admonishes — the word that holds up before me the image of myself that causes me to pause and reconsider — the word that challenges me to deeper consecration and higher resolve.”*

Another way to think about discerning is the old story about the three preachers who shared their secret ways for deciding what to do with the offering. The question was what part of the offering God should get. One said, “I take the offering in a backroom where I have line drawn on the floor, and I toss it all in the air. Whatever falls on my side of the line is mine and the rest is the Lord's.” “Well, I do it somewhat the same,” said the second preacher. “I go outside in full view of God

and draw a circle on the ground, and I shake and jiggle the money box for all I'm worth and throw it open so that all the offerings spring into the air, and whatever falls inside the circle is mine, and whatever is transported outside the circle is God's." A bit arrogantly, the third preacher speaks up and says, "For goodness sake, God is all powerful and can take whatever he likes. I throw the offering in the air and God takes what he wants and the rest is mine."

Trying to decide what God wants and what we want can be difficult. But the truth of the matter is, all that we have and all that we are belongs to God. We are to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. Absolutely everything in us, in our church, in our living is to be transformed by his amazing grace and Life-giving power. So we throw not only the offering in the air, we throw ourselves as well – our gifts, our skills, our relationships, our opportunities – and give it all to God to use as God knows best.

Pray earnestly, study to understand as completely as you can, and yearn for the best, the most pure, the most blameless way of living, and the God who began the wondrous work of salvation in you will carry it on to completion, leading you where you are intended to go, to become the person you are intended to become ... all the way into the Life with God that shall never end.

Pray for the Spirit of the Living God to move freely your life. Pray for the Spirit of the Risen Lord to move freely in our life together as his church. Pray for the Lord to fulfill the work he has begun in us. – Discern what is best!

Hymn 418 *Move in Our Midst*