

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Connected

Philippians 1:1-11

If there's one thing you don't want to be in this day and time, it's a disconnected person. What? You don't have a Facebook page? You're not on Instagram? What do you mean, you don't do email? So all you have is a landline, not a cell phone? Well, that rules out text messaging too, doesn't it? So what's the best way to contact you? What's the best way for me to connect with you?

How about something as basic as eye to eye and voice to ear, in the same room? Those still work too, don't they? During and after the pandemic of recent years, we've gained a renewed appreciation for the necessity of in person, flesh and blood presence with one another, including within the life of the church. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not opposed to connecting via all of today's high-tech gadgetry. I use various forms of technology every day to communicate with people. In fact, with all of the devices we can now hold in our hands, hook to our ears, and slip into our pockets, all of us have even fewer excuses for not staying connected. I'm simply saying that connectedness involves more than just touch screens and download speeds.

Connectedness can take on even greater significance when you're in a prison cell. That's where Paul composes the piece of correspondence that we call Philippians. Paul opens this letter like he does most of his letters, by greeting his listeners. Then he gives thanks for them. Notice also that Paul opens this thanksgiving section by talking about joy, which will turn out to be a constant theme in this letter. In fact, some people refer to this letter as "the epistle of joy." By joy, Paul's doesn't mean a sense of happiness that comes and goes depending on how good or bad his circumstances are. When Paul speaks of joy, he's talking about a settled sense of assurance, a gladness generated by his confidence that the work of salvation God has begun in him, and in the Philippian Christians, God will bring to completion when Christ comes again.

Paul's joy doesn't rise and fall as circumstances change. It remains steady. It upholds him. It sustains him. It propels him forward in the work of the gospel. In fact, joy is the kind of thing that flourishes, and in many ways thrives, in the midst of hardship and suffering, in places like a prison cell. That's why Paul can begin this letter by giving thanks and rejoicing.

This brings us to verses 7-8, which takes us into the heart of my message today. These aren't the words of someone who's a stranger to his hearers. Paul knows these people. They know him. As he said in verse 5, he looks back with fondness to the partnership that began to form as soon as the gospel was brought to them and they received it. That was when a bond began to form between Paul and the Philippians, a bond that has grown and thrived. Not because everything has gone well or run smoothly all the time, but because they share in the same task, the spread of the gospel. In short, the bond they have is a gospel bond, a gospel connection.

Listen again to what Paul says about this connection: "It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart." The word translated as "feel" is used ten

times in Philippians. In this verse, the NRSV translates it as “think.” Now this doesn’t mean that when it comes to the Philippians, Paul has to choose between his head and his heart. The Greek term means less than strictly cerebral and more than simply emotion. It’s a word that actually combines the activity of the head and the heart. We don’t really have an English verb that fully captures it. It’s mainly an attitude or mindset. So maybe the best way to put it is that Paul has a head/heart connection with the Philippians. The love of Christ has created in Paul a whole self affection for these brothers and sisters in Christ.

“I have you in my heart,” says Paul. As we look at Paul’s letters in the New Testament, it’s interesting to see how the content and the tone of each letter varies depending on the specific circumstances Paul is addressing in that particular congregation. In Galatians, he’s angry about how they have strayed from the gospel he preached to them. In the Corinthian letters, he’s worried about how their pride and their love of wisdom is dividing the congregation. In Romans, he lays out his gospel for the sake of unity between Jews and Gentiles in the church. And here in Philippians, there is, as I mentioned, a deep sense of gratitude and joy. I believe Paul has a special regard for them, not because he loves them more than the folks in his other churches, or because the Philippians are somehow more sanctified than the other congregations, but mainly because of the ways they have participated in the gospel during his imprisonment and hardships. In short, he and the Philippians have been through a lot together.

Now, you may say, “Yes, they have been through a lot together, but hasn’t Paul had the worst of it? After all, he’s the one who has suffered most at the hands of the authorities. He, not the Philippians, is the one in the prison cell, with a capital sentence hanging over him.” True. But at the same time, one of the reasons Paul writes this letter is to give thanks to God for the Philippians’ faithfulness and support, including the money he has received from them. Paul wants the Philippians to know that in one sense, they have been with him in that prison cell. They have suffered with him. Of all the churches Paul works with, he recognizes that these people have been exceptionally active participants in the gospel.

“Whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me.” What does Paul mean when he says that they “share in God’s grace”? This could be a reference to the financial assistance they’ve given him, or it could be his way of saying they’re involved in the same struggle that he is, which inevitably leads to suffering. Whichever it is, notice that Paul calls it God’s “grace.” Apparently, he regards every circumstance as an experience of grace, including his imprisonment, not primarily because it means suffering but because it means an opportunity to promote the gospel, and for God to be glorified. And Paul knows that he’s not alone in this work. By their faith and their behavior, the Philippians have shown that they have bonded with Paul and remain connected to him, especially when he’s behind bars for the sake of Christ.

I realize that I’ve spent a big chunk of today’s sermon filling in the picture of what Paul is saying to the Philippians and why he’s saying it. I’ve done this because it gives us important background for seeing how Paul’s connection with the Philippians connects with us. So let’s turn in that direction even more. Let’s listen for how the partnership between Paul and the Philippians can inform and shape our partnership with fellow believers in the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware (BCM/D), especially when it comes to this year’s state missions emphasis.

It helps to remember that our church was, from its beginning, part of the larger work of Baptists in the state of Maryland. In the August 1918 issue of a publication called *Maryland Baptist Church Life*, Dr. A. J. Fristoe of the Maryland Department of Evangelism wrote:

Down in Charles County, down on the Potomac where the humidity is highest, and summer heat is the hottest and the chiggers and ticks are thickest, meetings must be held amidst August inconveniences... There is Indian Head with swarms of humanity pouring in from all quarters and we Baptists waiting, waiting, waiting. Indian Head ought to have an organized Baptist Church in the next twelve months and can have it if we put a man there to stay and serve notice on the population that a Baptist Church will be established there.¹

Eventually a congregation was formed as the Indian Head Baptist Church, and that congregation became the sponsoring church for the Bryans Road Mission, which was constituted in 1958 as the Grace Baptist Church of Bryans Road. Sixty-five years later, here we are, still worshipping, working, and witnessing. Still growing into what Christian connectedness means for us in our day and time.

For one thing, it means being part of the larger Christian community. It means that we value fellowship. Not only fellowship with people in our congregation but also fellowship with people in other congregations. Think of other Christians you know at work, in your neighborhood, at school, or in other places where daily life takes you. Those individuals are your partners in Christ. Often, when we think of the church, we think of our particular congregation. And that's good, because it shows that we see the connection between faith in Christ and participating in the body of Christ. But our congregation is part of the even larger body of Christ, which includes all those who confess Jesus as Lord and live under his lordship.

Today is an occasion when we especially remember our brothers and sisters in Christ in our partner churches of the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware. This very day they gather to worship in Indian Head, Waldorf, Hughesville, Lexington Park, Lusby, Prince Frederick, Lanham, Annapolis, Baltimore, Dover, Gaithersburg, Cumberland, and many others towns, big and small, where these BCM/D churches, big and small, are proclaiming Christ. Here in Bryans Road, we're proclaiming Christ, but always with an awareness that we have partners in Christ. Paul's letter to the Philippians reminds us that we Christians need to provide each other with encouragement and mutual support between churches. Remember that we're not alone in the work of the gospel. We're connected.

Another way we can use this day is simply to give thanks for our fellow believers in BCM/D churches. One of the best ways to do that is through prayer. When we pray for other Christians, we often rush into petition and intercession for them. We pray that God will guide them, teach them, encourage them, correct them, lead them, and so on. And there's nothing wrong with asking God for those kinds of things. But rather than being in such a hurry to intercede for them, we should first focus on just being thankful for them, and expressing that gratitude to God. Paul says that his prayers of thanksgiving for the Philippian church are constant prayers. He continually remembers them with joy, with confidence, and with love. Those prayers of thanksgiving strengthen his bond with that particular community of Christians. We ought to let that way of praying shape the way that we pray when we remember our fellow believers in the churches of the BCM/D. When they know that we're giving thanks for them, it strengthens their faith and helps cement our connection with them.

And on that foundation of gratitude, we can build our prayers of intercession for one another within our state convention. Back in May, I received a card in the mail from Adron Dozat, prayer coordinator for the BCM/D. It read:

Hello Rev. Holder. The other day, while praying through my list of churches, I came to your name and Grace Baptist Church. I want you to know that I pray for you often. I pray God gives you great wisdom, youthful energy, sabbath rest and a person with a Barnabas spirit to

keep you encouraged. I welcome any prayer requests that you are able to share with the BCM/D.

I was able to respond and share with Adron some requests about specific circumstances and needs in my ministry and in the life and ministry of our congregation. This is a wonderful example of the kind of gospel partnership and mutual support that we can offer to one another within our network of congregations.

And last of all, we can apply Paul's relationship with the Philippian Christians to our own lives by devoting ourselves to the faithful combination of prayer, which I've just covered, and giving. Giving can take many forms. But as Paul's bond with the Philippians reminds us, financial generosity is essential. As I mentioned, one of the reasons Paul wrote this letter was to thank them for their financial gift to him. Though he does that later in the letter, he may already be hinting at his gratitude. Note that he doesn't regard this money as simply a personal gift. He regards it as part of their response to the gospel. The grace that they and he have experienced in Christ is reflected in their generosity toward him. Plus their gift, like prayer, helps cement their bond with Paul. So today, as each of us begins to consider our own participation in this year's state missions offering, let's remember that we're not just trying to do our part to meet a goal or support a budget. Rather, present your gift as a sign of your fellowship, your connection with the larger Christian community, particularly Maryland/Delaware Baptists, and as part of your response to God's grace in Christ.

¹ Friscoe is quoted in, "A Brief History of the Grace Baptist Church of Bryans Road."