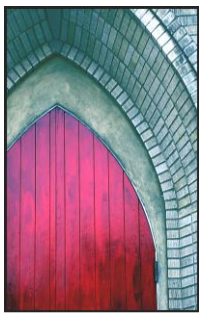


Abounding Love

TEXT: PHILIPPIANS 1.1-11



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Oak Hills
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Overland Park,
Kansas

VISION SUNDAY

Today is “Vision Sunday”—the date on the calendar that we mark a time to look forward together as a church. This is the beginning of the fall season of ministry—existing ministries are regrouping and new ministries getting underway. This Vision Sunday stands at an interesting place in our life together as a church. Nearly four months ago, our senior pastor announced that that he had been pursued by, and had accepted a call to serve, a church in Nashville, TN.

The questions that we typically ask this time of year become even weightier for us this year: “Who are we?” “Where are we going?” It can be unsettling for an organization to ask the two questions that are before us, but even more so during a time of transition. It can be scary not knowing who you are or where you’re going. But finding the answers can be truly scary because the answers that the organization finds may not be the answers given every individual within the organization and they might begin to wonder if they still belong. I’ll say up front—there’s a good chance I’m not going to answer these questions with the detail that most of us would like.

To seek answers, we turn together to the book of Philippians. We will be working through this book over the course of the next few months. My prayer is that this will give us a consistency as we work together through a book of the Bible. I also pray that the content of this book—the centrality of the Gospel, the call to joy, and the unity of God’s people would continue to shape who we are as a church.

This morning we consider the first 11 verses of this letter. It was written by Paul, from jail, to the church in Philippi that began through His direct ministry. He begins by writing these words roughly 10 years later to a people he dearly loves:

PHILIPPIANS 1.1-11

¹Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: ²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. ⁹And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰so that you may approve what is excellent, and

so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

BOUND BY LOVE

Early in the American Civil War, a union major penned these words to his young wife:

My very dear Sarah,

The indications are very strong that we shall move in a few days—perhaps tomorrow. Lest I should not be able to write again, I feel impelled to write a few lines that may fall under your eye when I shall be no more ... Sarah my love for you is deathless, it seems to bind me with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence could break; and yet my love of Country comes over me like a strong wind and bears me unresistibly on with all these chains to the battle field.

I love these words. I love them for their courage, for their sacrifice, and for their sense of eternity. We hear in them the honest desire that love would transcend even the confines of mortality. And yet, it is in what they cannot fulfill that we hear echoes of something even greater—and we can see ourselves. All who put their faith in Jesus are those who are bound by mighty cables that nothing can break. We are bound by love.

This shows up in these 11 verses in the way that Paul describes believers. They are those who are “saints in Christ Jesus”^{1,1}—called ‘holy’ not by behavior or even intention, but because they are “in Christ.”^{Rom 5.6-11; 8.1; 2 Cor 5.21} Paul is clear: this is what is true of all believers.^{1,1, 4, 7, 8} They are those who have labored side-by-side with Paul in his mission of proclaiming the Gospel^{1,5} and who have supported his work in every circumstance, even from a distance.^{1,7} They are those in whom God has begun something truly good and in whom God is at work to complete what He began.^{1,6} And because of this we hear Paul talk about the believers at Philippi with a gut-level joyful affection.^{1,3, 7-8}

If your faith is in Christ, you are a saint in Christ Jesus. Everything we know to be true flows from that. As much as we want to run to answer the question “where are we going?” we must never leave the first question: “who are we?” We are a people bound by love—bound to one another, bound to a mission, and even bound to sacrifice, but before any of that, we our bound to our Savior by His love for us alone.

CALLED TO ABOUNDING LOVE

Resting in the Hope and Freedom of knowing who we are, we can begin to answer the second question: “Where are we going?” The answer comes as we hear Paul pray^{1,9-11} and it sounds familiar: we are called to abounding love. This shouldn’t surprise us. Jesus summarized the faithful life as one lived loving God and loving our neighbor.^{Mt 22.34-40} Paul tells us that this is what he’s praying—but notice how he describes this love as the prayer unfolds.

First, it's a "**knowing love.**"⁹ If our abounding love is toward both God and man, the implication is that we would grow in our knowledge of both God and man. This is all personal knowledge—it is inherently experiential because it is the relational knowledge of knowing God and knowing other people. For us, this means study and it means listening. It means work. It means time.

Second, Paul adds that this is a "**discerning love.**"⁹ His prayer is that the knowledge we gain would lead to faithful living. To this Paul adds that our love of God and others would drive us to be constantly looking, evaluating, and seeking to understand the world around us and to live accordingly.^{1,10} To discern is to be able to distinguish and to decide. This implies intention on our part. Simply living based on what might or might not come our way is not an option for us.

Third, Paul prays that this knowing and discerning love would evidence itself in our lives as **holy love.**^{1,10-11} Knowledge and discernment is toward the end that that our lives would be transformed more and more to reflect who God is. "Pure" speaks to a sincerity and single-mindedness; "blameless" is the life concerned with living faithfully, not only in one's own life but also with regard to others. This is a process that we will not complete in this life—Paul is speaking in eternal perspective here—and yet this growth is real. The capstone of this thought is that the holy life is one "*filled with the fruit of righteousness.*" In other words, this is never something we simply attain; it flows out of our faith in Christ.

Where are we going? We called to pursue lives of abounding love—towards God and toward each other. This means two things. 1) Abounding love will evidence itself in the life of the believer—in knowledge, discernment, and holiness with regard to God and others. 2) Abounding love becomes the standard for our knowledge, discernment and holiness toward God and others. Love with wither and die without knowledge, discernment, and holiness. And if love is not present, our attempts at knowledge, discernment, and holiness will be hollow and dangerous. There are several unanswered questions for us as a church right now. And at least a few of them probably won't be answered within the next few weeks. We're called here to live with abounding love for each other.

TO THE TABLES ...

So let me now bring Philippians to the tables that are set up here. When was the last time you had a great conversation that you didn't see coming with somebody in this room? How did that come about—what made that possible? How long has it been since you were at your wits end with regard to disciplining your kids? What did you do next? How recently have you found yourself having to face sin in your life that you assumed no one else new about? That's why those tables are set-up in this room. We believe that our love for God and our love others will not abound more and more apart from it happening with other believers. We grow in our knowledge of God not merely based on our private reading and experience; we grow as we wrestle together to understand what Scripture means and how we live it out. This is Sunday School and men's and women's Bible studies. We grow in our discernment as we learn from the mistakes of others—by asking people who have been where we are how they responded to similar circumstances. This is Community Groups and Dinners for Eight. We grow in holiness as we give others the freedom to give us feed-back as to what they see in areas of our lives to

which we may be blind. This is the culmination of seeing each other for weeks, months, and longer not just across the room on a Sunday morning, in each other's homes, on mission trips, and even watching football.

How we answer "where are we going?" is completely dependent upon our answer to the question "who are we?" Is your pursuit of knowledge and insight, your chasing after right living, and your efforts to always do the right thing all built upon finding rest in being bound by the love of Jesus? Or do you find yourself empty, spent, and never satisfied at the end of every long day. Are you tired of trying to do the right thing and play the part of a Christian? Are you bound by the unending, untiring, unflinching love of a Savior, or are you simply bound? The promise of the Gospel is that in Christ, we are bound by the love of God, and in Him our love will abound.

Notes:

