

“Holding Each Other In Our Hearts” **Philippians 1:3-11; Psalm 126**

When I was about three years old, my parents decided to get me a dog as a pet. I, of course, don't remember what precipitated this decision. Likely, I had made the request seeing the pets of other children. Neither of my parents were that fond of dogs, so likely a puppy appeared as a present for me.

But very quickly this idea turned into a disaster. We were renting the house my grandparents had built for their retirement. And like all puppies, when indoors it chewed on clothes and furniture, and found inconvenient spots to use the bathroom. And when it was outdoors, it barked and whined to get back indoors.

Well, the puppy's behavior quickly frayed my parents' nerves. So the logical solution was to get rid of the puppy, give it away. The difficulty was that I had become attached to it.

So my parents sat down with me and carefully explained why we needed to find “Peanuts,” the name I gave it, a new home. He couldn't stay in the house, they said. His barking bothered the neighbors. When he grew up he would need more space than our little back yard. And since we lived on a major street, the traffic posed a real hazard to him. The reasons for giving “Peanuts” away were varied and numerous.

Well, I agreed with my parents, as most three year old will eventually do. And as a consolation prize, let's not call it a bribe, my parents bought me a popular toy called “Mr. Potato Head.”

In an age of computers and video games, this doesn't sound like much, but in 1953, Mr. Potato Head was a hot item. You took a potato, and then the kit contained plastic ears, a nose, mouth, legs, hat, etc. that you stuck on the potato making a potato man. Remember, I was only three years old.

Well, everything seemed fine. My dad had given “Peanuts” to a family who lived on a farm and I had Mr. Potato Head. But my parents had not counted on one thing. Every night when I said my prayers, I began to pray for “Peanuts.” Folding my hands, I said to God: “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. God bless Mommy, Daddy, and Peanuts...”

My mother said it became unbearable. My dad called it one of the hardest things he ever had to do in his life when he returned to ask that family if he could have the dog back. Regardless of how much trouble the dog was, or even that now I possessed Mr. Potato Head, I had taken “Peanuts” into my heart.

In verse seven the Apostle Paul writes to the Philippians: “It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart...”

Paul's Letter to the Philippians is one of his most personal. Joyful is the term often used to describe it. Philippi was the first church Paul established on the European continent. And obvious from Paul's tone and words, this was a church for which he held deep and lasting affection. And apparently, the feeling was

mutual. The Philippians had sent Paul money to help with his ministry. Paul looks forward to the day when he can see them again.

And one of the interesting aspects is that this joyfulness takes place in the midst of turmoil and trial. Paul sits in prison, most likely in Rome. The Philippians continue to face a predominantly hostile religious culture outside and theological wrangling inside. Yet, in the midst of all this Paul writes: “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart...”

“...because you hold me in your heart...” A noteworthy element of these words is that in Greek, the original language of the New Testament, this phrase can be translated in two different ways, both perfectly correct. The first we have mentioned: “because you hold me in your heart.” But Paul may have meant: “because I hold you in my heart.”

Now, as I thought about this phrase it struck me that this literary ambiguity might be intentional. Maybe the Apostle Paul wanted to express the mutual love and concern Christians are to carry for one another. Just as the Philippians held Paul in their hearts through prayer and love, so Paul held each one of them.

Today, we are celebrating the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. The Sacrament carries a multitude of theological meanings. We recall Christ’s death and resurrection. We remember his decision to give his life for each one of us.

But also inherent in this act is the love and concern we share for one another. And not just here in this room, but with the faithful all over the world. As we partake of the body and blood of Christ we recall the faith that unites, the love that binds, that when we gather here we hold one another in our hearts. And not just those we can see, but Christians in every part of God’s creation. The Sacrament reminds us that we are not alone. Different languages, skin tones, and customs differentiate us, but here each of us “lifts up the cup of salvation and calls on the name of the Lord.”

The Reverend David Schreffler tells how at his church they alternated their styles of communion. Some months they used intinction, dipping the bread in the grape juice. On a Sunday in which they were using a more traditional style, like we do here at Westminster, they passed the bread in front of little three year old Alyssa. She took a piece and then she turned to her mother and said, “Where’s the dip?”

Even when we do not comprehend all of the theological intricacies of this act, we instinctively know we are gathered together as a family, where there should be something to go with our bread. And one of the elements that is served with the bread is our mutual fellowship. The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is a visible sign of God’s love for us, our new life in Christ. But it also expresses our love for one another, our bond of faith in Christ, our holding each other in our hearts.

The Christian Church has always been, and will always be, strained by theological, social, and political issues. Nineteen hundred and fifty years ago it was circumcision, sixteen hundred years ago it was Jesus' divine/human nature, one hundred and fifty years ago in America it was slavery. Fifty years ago it was the ordination of women. Today, it is homosexuality. Fifty years from now it will be something else. Yet, in the midst of all these conflicts, these struggles to understand God's leading, for almost 2000 years Christians of different nationalities, races, and opinions have gathered around this table and decided to love and pray for one another, to hold each other in our hearts.

It was a bitterly cold day in the city. A small boy stood shivering over a steel grate in the sidewalk. His clothes were thin and tattered. A woman, walking home from church where she had taken communion, stopped and engaged the youngster in conversation. Discovering that he was truly a child of the street she took him to a clothing store and outfitted him from head to toe, including a warm hat, coat, and gloves.

Well, the little boy was filled with joy and gratitude and could not thank her enough. As they said goodbye, the grateful youngster turned back to ask, "Are you God's mother?"

"Oh, no!" the kind woman answered, "I'm just a child of God."

Whereupon the little boy smiled and replied, "I knew you were related."

Around this table we are all related, all of us children of God. And because of that, by words, actions, and prayers we hold one another in our hearts.

"Holding Each Other In Our Hearts"

For the Apostle Paul to be held as a prisoner, deprived of freedom of movement, uncertain of his ultimate fate, and in spite of this to write a letter filled with joy denotes both a faith in God and those to whom you write. The Apostle Paul remained confident that the love and grace of God would sustain him. But he also found solace and comfort in knowing that the Philippians held him in their hearts.

This morning, take this bread and grape juice knowing that Christ sustains you with his spiritual food of love and forgiveness. But at the same time think of those other children of God, soldiers and civilians in Iraq and Syria, house churches in China, medical missionaries in Africa, fellow Christians at Christ Episcopal, First Baptist, St. Mary's Roman Catholic, our Jewish brothers and sisters at the Temple of Israel, and hold them in your heart, as each and everyone of us does our best to bring the love of God to a broken world.

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