

**St John United Church of Christ**  
**Rev. Barbara Lohrbach**  
**December 10, 2006**

**Philippians 1:3-11**

**“Every Time I Remember You”**

One of the lectionary lessons appointed on this the 2nd Sunday of Advent, is from Philippians and offers us a beautiful reminder of the importance of faith lived out in community.

The epistle Philippians, is one of Paul’s letters in the New Testament—a letter written by Paul while he was in prison. The recipient of this letter is the church at Philippi, a church founded by Paul after he received a vision that convinced Paul that God was calling him to preach the good news of Jesus in Europe. The story of Paul’s vision is found in Acts 16.

The church at Philippi was important to Paul. The Philippians were hospitable to Paul. He lived with them and they shared their resources with Paul when he was in Philippi. They sent gifts in support of Paul’s ministry when he was elsewhere. Paul remembers praying together, singing together, eating together, lodging together, and working together. The letter Paul writes is filled with expressions of gratitude for all these memories and for the church’s continued ministry in Philippi. Paul, writing from prison in an unknown location, encourages this church. The tone of the letter is one of joy. Fourteen times in this letter to the Philippians, Paul urges rejoicing: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”

Today we hear the words of Paul’s letter as the Philippians would have heard it—read aloud to the gathered congregation. Hear Paul’s words today as a Christmas letter. Advent and Christmas are not just seasons on the church calendar, but ever-present realities. Christ is coming. Christ is born in us. Christ will come again. Hear these words from Philippians not only as Paul’s letter to an ancient congregation, but as God’s words to us, a congregation doing God’s mission in today’s world.

Read Philippians 1:3-11

“I thank God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you.”

Can we hear those words from the God who came to be one of us long ago? Can we hear those words from God known to us in the person of Jesus the Christ? And can we not only hear these words said to us, but believe these words are meant for us as well?

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“I thank God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you.”

What would happen in our world if our attitude towards others was this kind of gratitude and joy Paul speaks about rather than judgment and fear?

Paul is writing to a community of faith, not just individuals. These are people, who like us, shared life together. And just like us, shared life can be both easy and demanding.

T. S. Eliot asked, “What live have we, have we not life together?” The life of a Christian community is a witness to the actualization of joy, hope, and love. The community cannot with integrity preach the power of God’s loving presence if the community has not appropriated the sufficiency of that loving presence in its own life. In other words—the church cannot tell the good news of God’s love if the church does not live the good news of God’s love day by day under its own roof.

When we love one another through the joys and struggles of living together, we are a living, breathing example of all that God wants for humankind. It is God’s purpose to bless, to keep and to complete. The past, the present and the future come together in this text. God births the community, God keeps the community together and God wants the community to continue.

This is the message for us today as well. We are a community, St. John church, that God birthed long before any of us were around to be a part of it. We are a community that has endured by the grace of God and the determination of generations of people. We continue to be a community that God needs in this time and this place.

This is the message of Advent, a season of expectation, of hoping. This is the time to remember that God is not finished. God is not finished with the church. God is not finished with the world.

This scripture lesson also comes from a very personal place for me as well. I identify with Paul as I think about the letter I might write to you, the people of St. John. As we pray together, sing together, eat together, work together and play together, I am all the more confident that God needs us in this time and this place to be a community where hospitality and generosity are the hallmarks of God’s graciousness in our world.

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So I humbly offer words written to you, dear friends, on this day as we dedicate ourselves to ministry together in 2007 and beyond.

I thank God as I remember that it was God who brought us together as pastor and people almost 3 years ago now. My prayers are filled with joy as I recall the ministry that we share, the lives that are transformed and the possibilities that lie before us in the coming year. I am confident that the God who began a good work among us will continue to be with us as we commit our resources to this ministry. It is good for me to feel this way about all of you. We have learned to trust one another and to honor one another as God's beloved creatures even as we face the challenges of being a community. And this is my prayer, that our love may overflow more and more and more so that all people will know they are loved, first by God and then by us. May we be mindful in this season of Advent and Christmas that God Immanuel is God with us—always and forever. Thanks be to God for the ministry we share.