

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES
PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11

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When I was the student pastor in Woodlawn, Kentucky, the biggest Sunday of the year was not Easter, not even Christmas. The crowning Sunday of the year was Memorial Day. The church owned a little cemetery and people came from near and far to remember their ancestors, eat fried chicken, and tell tall tales. It was such an important day of the year that I was never allowed to preach the sermon. We always had a guest preacher from Louisville or Lexington.

My, how times have changed. Who uses Memorial Day any more to remember? This is a day of fun in the sun, cruises on the lake, or a hike in the woods. But at the risk of nostalgia, that tastes good with the first bite but grows bitter with the second and third chew, I want to use this Memorial Sunday to remember.

I THANK MY GOD EVERY TIME I REMEMBER YOU. (Verse 3)

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, who could have been bitter with pain and twisted by abuse, writes from a dingy Roman prison words of great affirmation. *I thank my God every time I remember you.*

Did you see the cartoon featuring a small cat being attacked by a big dog? The cat ran about a half block then stopped, turned, faced the dog and let out a ferocious bark, not a meow, but a bark. The stunned dog slid to a stop, turned around, went and hid under the house. The caption underneath contained these words: "Sometimes it helps to know a second language."

Christians need to learn the language of gratitude. It may not come natural for us, but we need to learn it anyway.

The mystic Meister Eckehart once said, "If the only prayer you ever say in your life is 'thank you' that would be sufficient."

I thank my God because of your partnership in the gospel. (Verse 5)

The partners I've had in the gospel these last 44 years have not been seminary professors, denominational executives, nor high powered consultants flown in from far away places. My partners in the gospel have been you people who fill the pews and do the work of ministry.

My partners in the gospel have been Cap and Ruth Furnish who told me at eighteen I could preach like Billy Graham. My partners in the gospel have been the people at St. Paul who dared me to dream big dreams for a church land locked in the middle of the city. My partners in the gospel have been these crowning years of ministry at Brentwood where God has done more than any of

us could imagine or think. I thank my God for each of you, for your faithfulness from the first day until now.

I thank God because I am confident that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion. (Verse 6)

People have been stopping me all week. Tell us about our new preacher. Can he teach like Jesus? Does he preach like Peter? Is he a visionary like Paul? – I've never met your new preacher. While everything I hear about him is good, my confidence is deeper than the résumé of your new Senior Pastor.

God is not finished with this outstanding church in Methodism. While it is not a perfect church, because it is made up of imperfect people, it has yet to reach its full potential. Did you know that in the 157 year history of this congregation the average stay of a Senior Pastor has been three years? Unlike most large churches of any denomination, this congregation is not dependent upon its Senior Pastor. Nobody can say this is Jeff Fryer's church or Bob Spain's church, or Joe Pennel's church, and certainly it will not be said that this church belongs to Howard Olds. This Church is of God. God is still on the throne, God is still able, God is still leading. All we have to do is follow. *I thank my God because I am confident that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion.*

AND THIS IS MY PRAYER: that love may abound... (Verse 9)

I felt like we got a little taste of heaven Wednesday night. Love filled this place. If there was ever a moment when heaven came down and glory filled our souls, it was Wednesday. My sincere thanks to all of you who came and made it possible.

In a *Peanuts* cartoon, Lucy complains, "My life is a drag. I'm completely fed up. I never felt so low in all my life." Linus responds, "When you are in a mood like that you need to be thankful and count your blessings." Lucy replies, "I could count all my blessings on one finger. What do I have to be thankful for?" Linus continues "Well, for one thing, you have a little brother that loves you." With that Lucy runs over and gives Linus a big hug. Smiling, Linus says, "Every now and then, I say the right thing."

When you tell people you love them, you are saying the right thing. Bob Fisher, President of Belmont University, and his wife, Judy, have a new book entitled *Life is a Gift*. It is a series of interviews with 104 hospice patients. And one thing they said in unison was "Whoever you love, go home and hug them, and tell them how much you love them that day. Don't wait." We express love with words.

We express love with actions. A college girl was converted to Christ on her college campus. Not being from a Christian home she wondered how she could communicate her new faith to her family. Finally she decided she would simply show them by her actions. Once she was spoiled and selfish, she now became thoughtful and generous. Once known to be disrespectful, she now sought to honor her parents in all things. She started cleaning her room, putting the dirty

dishes in the dishwasher. It didn't take long for her parents to notice and to ask "What's happened to you? You are different." Love does make people different.

This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.

And this is my prayer: that your discernment will be pure. So that you will be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ. (Verse 10)

When Norris Dam was first built up in the hills of East Tennessee, a worker on the night shift noticed something strange. He could hear the dynamos humming powerfully in the quiet of the night, generating incredible amounts of electricity. But when he looked across the lake every cabin was lighted by kerosene lamps. You see, the transmission lines had not yet been laid. People lived in the shadow of a magnificent hydroelectric dam, but were not yet plugged in.

There is a will of God.
The will of God can be known.
The desire to please God pleases God.

Plug into the Power.

This is my prayer: that your fruit will be plentiful. I pray that you will be filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ. (Verse 11)

Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes, so that it will be even more fruitful. (John 15:1-2)

The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22)

We are so brainwashed by productivity even in the Church that we know very little about fruitfulness. The results of productivity are big churches, big budgets, big staff, big choir, big egos. Productivity is a result of goals established, strategies implemented, evaluations made. When you are engrossed in productivity you have little time for fruitfulness.

To be fruitful is to plant a seed, tend the soil, maybe add a little water and wait. It often takes more than one lifetime, more than one tenure, for fruit to come to fruition. For as Paul says, "*I planted, Apollos watered, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who makes things grow. (I Corinthians 3:6-8)*

So, may this church always bear much fruit for the glory of God and the good of people.