

**Mark 12:28-34**

**Philippians 1:3-11**

**May 28, 2023**

*Final sermon preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, North Carolina*

## **THANK GOD! THANK YOU!**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

When I was growing up, we had a rule in our house that Christmas thank you notes had to be written by New Year's Day (at best), at the very latest before you went back to school after Christmas break. To this day, I find myself writing thank you notes as I watch the Rose Parade on New Year's Day, it's that deeply ingrained. I come by that practice honestly, though. When my mom used to visit here in Wallace, she and Sit Knowles got to be good friends. One day Sit came to the church and said, "You need to tell your mother to quit doing what she's doing!" "What is she doing?" I asked. "Well," Sit said, "I sent her a birthday card and she sent me a thank you note for the birthday card. I decided to drop her a note in response and she sent me a thank you note for the thank you note I sent her for the thank you note she sent me for the birthday card I sent her." "Sit," I said, "you're on your own!"

Paul's letter to the Philippians has often been called "the joyful letter," and so it is. Throughout his epistle Paul expresses his joy in serving Christ, his finding joy in all circumstances, and his joy in being in relationship with the Philippine believers. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice," Paul writes to his friends. (Philippians 4:4) His letter to the Philippians is also a thank you note. When the believers at Philippi heard that Paul was in prison, they prayed he would be released. On top of that, they sent gifts to Paul in prison. At the very end of his letter, Paul writes, "You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs, more than once. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen." (Philippians 4:15-20)

Paul begins his letter by thanking 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." Paul also thanks the Philippians "because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me."

In April 1997, I filled out a Personal Information Form for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), for Pastor Nominating Committees to read. In the narrative section, where I described my pastoral work to date and my hopes for the future, I wrote, "It is

exciting to think about being called to a church in which the members are willing to share the leadership in the congregation, because I am convinced that this is the model of ministry set forth in the scriptures, in which the minister, elders, deacons, and members of the congregation are all responsible for and serious about the ongoing ministry of the church. I also greatly enjoy working with people who say to me, "This is what we want to do, this is where we want to go as a church — help us get there!" That describes the Wallace Presbyterian Church — and I thank you!

A couple of weeks before we moved to Wallace in March 1998, I received in the mail in Roanoke Rapids a copy of this church's March 1998 newsletter. On the cover were "Reflections" from Margaret Hall Glasgow about the new minister coming to town. Margaret Hall wrote, "I like to think that the covenant between Dr. Gladden and our church will be characterized by patience, endeavor, and commitment as we proclaim together the majesty of God and the promise of the risen Christ." As Paul thanked God because of the Philippians sharing in the gospel from the first day until now, so I thank God and you for the sharing in the gospel from the first day of April 1998 until now.

Paul thanked God and the Philippians because they all shared in God's grace with him. I experienced God's grace on the very first day we were living in the manse, Friday, March 27, 1998. Nancy was putting things away in the kitchen and I was unpacking boxes in the den, which is now the Helping Hands Food Pantry. Someone knocked on the back door. When I opened the door, I saw an elegant, distinguished looking woman standing there. She was holding a pie. "Hello," she said, "I'm Dot Hall, a member of the church. I wanted to welcome you and your family. I brought you a lemon blueberry pie." Now, sometimes my tongue engages before my brain does, and I said, "Thank you, I don't really care for lemon pie." After a few minutes, Dot left and Nancy called to me from the kitchen, "Did you really say what I think you said?" Sheepishly I said, "Yes." The next day I was unpacking more boxes when there came a knock at the back door. When I opened the door, there stood Dot Hall holding another pie. She asked, "Do you like chocolate pie?" "Oh, yes ma'am," I said, "I **love** chocolate pie!" When I told somebody else in the church what I had said, their reaction was, "Not Dot Hall! She's known for her lemon blueberry pies!" That, my friends, is sharing in God's grace! [NOTE: Last night our out-of-town guests enjoyed some delicious lemon blueberry pie from the Rose Hill Restaurant!]

I thank God because God saw fit to call me to be the pastor of the Wallace Presbyterian Church. I thank you because you called me to be the pastor of this church many years ago and we have worked together in so many ways over the years. There is not enough time this morning for me to list all of the ways you have shown that you hold me in your hearts, nor is there time for me to list all of the ways I hold you in my heart. It has been a high privilege and a humbling experience to pray with you, to be in hospital rooms and surgical waiting areas with you, to stand at the graveside with you and to celebrate life in the midst of death here in the sanctuary, to baptize your children, to officiate at your weddings, to enjoy fellowship around the tables in the Fellowship Hall and when we gather at the Lord's table, to worship by the lake at Camp

Kirkwood, to teach our children the faith, to preach God's Word and lead God's people in worship, to be blessed by the glorious music of our choir, handbell choir, Karla, and Vera, to make our way through not one but two 500 year floods and an unprecedented worldwide pandemic, and to laugh and cry and wrestle with the deepest questions of life and faith. Through it all, I know you have held me in your hearts, just as I hold you in my heart — and as we move ahead, we can continue to put our trust in our one true God who, through his amazing grace in Jesus Christ, holds us in his own heart.

I thank God and I thank you for your patience, forgiveness, and generosity during my ministry. You allowed me to travel to Tabasco, Mexico many times and graciously welcomed our Presbyterian partners to our church and into your homes when they visited us. You overwhelmingly supported the students at Justo Mwale Theological University in Lusaka, Zambia by providing bicycles to numerous graduating pastors so they could travel from church to church to preach the Good News. You contributed money to help purchase books for the new pastors' libraries. And twice you sent me with your blessings to teach Greek, although Hurricane Florence drove me home a bit early in 2018. I established friendships with faculty and students there that continue ten years later. You generously allowed me to take a four month sabbatical during the summer of 2018 so I could rest and regroup and indulge my interest in the gospel of Mark. And the list goes on and on and on . . .

But, most of all, I thank God and I thank you, as Paul told the Philippians, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. But what's next? Since I announced my retirement in January, many of you have said to me, "What are we going to do without you? We're never going to replace you. There will never be another Dr. Phil!" I appreciate those sentiments and kind thoughts, but this is my answer: You're going to keep on sharing in the gospel and serving Jesus Christ, just as the members of this congregation have done since November 8, 1884. Already God is working in the life of a minister somewhere and in the lives of people in this congregation who will be elected to the Pastor Nominating Committee. Eventually they will come together with God's guidance and you will have a new pastor, just as God has provided you with pastors throughout the last one hundred thirty-nine years. And, no, that person will not be Dr. Phil — and that's OK, that's a good thing. I wasn't Charles Davenport or Tom Hay or Carl Uzzell or Jim Atwood or Rev. Hood or Rev. Currie. They were called for a particular season in the life of this church, and so was I. In my first years here at WPC, when my study was off the Fellowship Hall before we built the "new" building (which is now eighteen years old!), I could sit at my desk in what is now The Prayer Room and look out at the portrait of Mr. Currie when he was an older man. It's one of those paintings in which the person's eyes follow you. Every time I looked at Mr. Currie, he was looking back at me. Many times I said, "I'm doing the best I can, Mr. Currie. I hope you know that!"

I would never compare myself to the apostle Paul (for many reasons), but I did find these comments particularly fitting to this occasion. In his sermon commentary on these verses from Philippians 1, Doug Bratt writes, "Paul adds that he can thank God for the Philippians' partnership with him because he knows that God will carry their

work to ‘completion.’ So it’s not just that the Philippians and he have done and are doing good works for the Lord together. The apostle is also fully confident God will finish that gospel work, even if the Philippians must, with God’s help, do it without the apostle’s help. God will accomplish God’s plans and purposes, even if Paul doesn’t survive to carry them out.”<sup>1</sup> Now, I certainly hope I don’t meet the same fate as Paul did in a Roman prison, but I am equally confident that the one who began a good work among you, in November 1884 and in April 1998 and all along the way, will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ, even in my absence.

The great 20th century Reformed theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, wrote in 1962, “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.”<sup>2</sup>

Read the history of this church. Walk around in the building and outside and read the plaques on the walls and the bricks in front of the sanctuary. Look at the pictures in the Currie Building and the history room. You will see the truth of Dr. Niebuhr’s words in the names and faces of the people who have gone before us in this place. The group of Presbyterians who left the Rockfish Church to start a “town” church in 1884. The Building Committee that led this congregation through a seven-year campaign in the midst of the Great Depression to build the Currie Building for Christian Education and the Building Committee that led us through another campaign in the 2000’s to enhance the wonderful music ministry of our congregation. The ministers who have served with you through the years, the elders and deacons and Sunday School teachers and Presbyterian Women and Men, and youth leaders — so many faithful people, “saints,” have come before us, who never saw the good work of this place come to completion. Nevertheless, they remained faithful to their God and laid the foundation for us to build upon — even if we ourselves may never see the completion of the good work God has begun and continues to do and will always continue to do through you in the Wallace Presbyterian Church.

On the morning of March 25, 1996, thirty-five year old Jonathan Larson died unexpectedly from an aortic aneurysm. The off-Broadway premiere of his show *Rent* had been scheduled for that evening. As they say, the show must go on, and it did, but not in front of a public audience. The grieving cast simply read through the first act, but broke out into song and dance in the second act as they remembered Larson, who never got to see the completion of his work. That year *Rent* moved to Broadway and won the Tony for Best Musical, along with Best Book, Best Original Score, and Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Musical.

The signature song of *Rent* is “Seasons of Love.” It was written to be sung at the funeral of Angel, one of the main characters. But the song is really more about life than death. Here are the lyrics:

*Five hundred twenty-five thousand, six hundred minutes  
Five hundred twenty-five thousand moments so dear  
Five hundred twenty-five thousand, six hundred minutes  
How do you measure, measure a year?  
In daylights, in sunsets  
In midnights, in cups of coffee  
In inches, in miles  
In laughter, in strife  
In five hundred twenty-five thousand, six hundred minutes,  
How do you measure a year in the life?  
How about love?  
How about love?  
How about love?  
Seasons of love, seasons of love  
Five hundred twenty-five thousand, six hundred minutes  
Five hundred twenty-five thousand journeys to plan  
Five hundred twenty-five thousand, six hundred minutes  
How do you measure the life of a woman or man?  
In truths that she learned, or in times that he cried  
In bridges he burned, or the way that she died  
It's time now to sing out  
Though the story never ends  
Let's celebrate, remember a year  
In the life of friends  
Remember the love  
Measure in love  
Seasons of love  
Measure your life in love*

With apologies to the late Jonathan Larson and all cast members of *Rent* . . .

*Thirteen million, two hundred thirty-six thousand,  
four hundred eighty minutes  
How do you measure twenty-five years?*

*How about love?  
Seasons of love  
Let's celebrate, remember twenty-five years  
in the life of friends  
Remember the love  
Measure your life in love*

A scribe asked Jesus, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord

your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:28-31)

How do you measure twenty-five years? How do you measure one hundred thirty-nine years? How do you measure the life of a church? How about love? Measure your life in love . . . love of God and love of neighbor.

No, I won’t ever compare myself to the apostle Paul, but I will join him in saying to you, the Wallace Presbyterian Church, “this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.” (Philippians 1:9-11)

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I thank God!

Sisters and brothers in Christ, I thank you!

Amen.

***Let us pray: Faithful God, in baptism you claimed us. By your Holy Spirit you are working in our lives, empowering us to live a life worthy of our calling. Guide us by your Holy Spirit, that in your service we may grow in faith, hope, and love, and be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Doug Bratt, “Sermon Commentary for Sunday, December 9, 2018, Philippians 1:3-11,” at [www.cepreaching.org](http://www.cepreaching.org).

<sup>2</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962), 63.