



December 2015 Message for Congregations and Lay and Rostered Leaders

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ –

I thank my God every time I remember you... (Philippians 1:3).

I have heard from many rostered leaders that their congregation, council, or small group has been using the 2015 monthly articles for shared learning, discernment and reflection together. It is my intent to continue this practice in 2016 with the article forwarded mid-month via our synod e-list and available on the synod website. In 2016 I will be focusing on themes of Practicing Our Faith.

Throughout this year I invited you to reflect on portions of Paul's letter, *to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi (1:1b)*, as you gathered for church council, adult study, youth group, coffee group and were engaged in learning, discernment and reflection together. Relying heavily on the writings of Fred Craddock and of David Lose, each article included a brief reflection on a Scripture passage, questions for reflection and discussion, and a prayer. I encourage you, now as the year concludes, to read Paul's letter again in its entirety in one sitting; remembering as you read that this is a letter – of Paul – to a church.

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Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The friends who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Philippians 4:21-23

And then it's over. Paul's letter ends with the traditional two-fold pattern common to ancient correspondence: greetings to all from all, and a benediction.

Except it's not really over. At this point Paul doesn't know what his fate will be. He longs to see the Philippians again but has no assurance of that. He hopes to continue his work but is resigned – no, not really resigned but actually quite confident – that whether he lives or dies, Christ will be glorified.

And so while his conclusion is traditional, it is also both personal and imperative. Greet every saint – that is, each and every individual member – in the Philippian congregation for me, he writes. And know that these greetings come not only from me but from friends and associates with me and, indeed, from other Christians even here in this Roman outpost where I am imprisoned.

Paul may not only be conveying a wealth of greetings, reminding the Philippians of the many fellow believers with whom they are bound, but also emphasizing that he is not alone. He has other associates and friends caring for him and, more than that, who will carry on should he return to the Lord in death.

Paul is not alone any more than the Philippians are alone, and together they will see the mission of God to love and reconcile the world advanced. For while Paul's witness may burn brighter than most, yet it is only one of a myriad of witnesses that together light the way forward into the world of God's love and peace.

With that confidence, Paul ends with a word of benediction that naturally echoes how he began his letter, blessing his friends with God's grace, grace that leads to a contented and confident peace whatever the future may hold.

Not a bad way to end, when you think of it. Or, for that matter, to begin.

Read and Reflect: Philippians 4:21-23

Discuss and Reflect:

What in this reading leads you to say, "I wonder about..." or, "I noticed..."

Comment on the following: *Paul may not only be conveying a wealth of greetings, reminding the Philippians of the many fellow believers with whom they are bound, but also emphasizing that he is not alone.*

Comment on the following: *...while Paul's witness may burn brighter than most, yet it is only one of a myriad of witnesses that together light the way forward into the world of God's love and peace.*

Pray together: *Gracious God, let your grace enfold us in confidence and peace, that we may face the future knowing that wherever we may go, and whatever may befall us, you are there out ahead, beckoning us forward. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen (Philippians 4:23).

The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).

In Christ Jesus –
Shalom,
+Larry

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Spirit -Led Leadership - Hope-Filled Discipleship - Innovative Tradition - Collaborative Partnerships