



March 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).*

This year I am inviting you to reflect on portions of Paul’s letter, *to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi (1:1b)*, as you gather for church council, adult study, youth group, coffee group and are engaged in learning, discernment and reflection together. Relying heavily on the writings of Fred Craddock and of David Lose, each article will include a brief reflection on a Scripture passage, questions for reflection and discussion, and a prayer. I encourage you, as we begin, to read Paul’s letter in its entirety in one sitting; remembering as you read that this is a letter – of Paul – to a church.

+++++

*If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind (Philippians 2:1-2).*

Sometimes we mean more than we say. That’s what’s going on here. Paul isn’t really posing a question about whether there is any encouragement in Christ. He’s assuming it. So we might read this as, “If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy – *and we all know there is* – then make my joy complete.”

Paul is reminding the Philippians of the gifts they have received as a community of faith. He’s reminding them, that is, of what’s *possible*.

This is absolutely crucial, because we live in a world that most often gives far more attention to limitations than to possibilities. So in the case of the Philippians, they may find themselves so overwhelmed by their struggles – folks are ridiculing them or worse, perhaps members of the community are wavering in the faith, and Paul is not there to help – that they can no longer remember what is possible. And so Paul reminds them: encouragement, consolation, sharing, compassion and sympathy – these things are all still available to you.

Paul’s words are for us too. We may get so overwhelmed by our struggles – loneliness, loss of a job, the end of a relationship, fear of the future – that we forget what is possible, what is available, right in front of us.

This doesn’t mean these things aren’t hard. What the Philippians faced was real, and it was hard, and so it was real hard! So also with the things that plague us. This isn’t about pretending the Christian life

spells an end to hardship and struggle. Rather, this is about affirming that these challenges are not our only reality. More than that, they are not the last word. Because God has raised Jesus from the dead we know that there is always one more word. And that word is life. That word is love. That word is hope.

Notice, now, what Paul goes on to say. After reminding the Philippians of what is possible, he challenges them to be of one mind or, perhaps more to the point, to live together in accord. Why? Because it is in the community that we are reminded of who we are and *whose* we are and of all that is available to us and possible for us. It is so easy, when we feel beleaguered, either to neglect our participation in the community or to take out our frustrations and fears on other community members.

And when we do we tear at the fabric of the very community that can help us surmount the difficulties that are causing us so much trouble.

Tend your communal life, Paul instructs, because it is only in community that we find the strength to persevere amid life's challenges. In order to help them do just that, Paul reminds the Philippians – and us – of what is possible: encouragement, consolation, sharing, compassion, sympathy, and more!

*Read and Reflect:* Philippians 2:1-2

*Discuss and Reflect:*

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

Comment on the following: *...we live in a world that most often gives far more attention to limitations than to possibilities.*

Share examples of the truth of this statement.

Comment on the following: *And so Paul reminds them: encouragement, consolation, sharing, compassion and sympathy – these things are all still available to you.*

When have you received or given these possibilities in spite of limitations – struggles?

Comment on the following: *Tend your communal life, Paul instructs, because it is only in community that we find the strength to persevere amid life's challenges. In order to help them do just that, Paul reminds the Philippians – and us – of what is possible: encouragement, consolation, sharing, compassion, sympathy, and more!*

When, in your communal life, have you received or given these possibilities?

*Pray together:* Gracious God, remind us that all things are possible with you so that we might be renewed in faith, hope, and love. 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

The Rev. Dr. Larry Kochendorfer, Bishop  
Synod of Alberta and the Territories  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada