Grace and Peace

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FCC Jeff City

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Philippians 1:3-11

 I thank my God every time I remember you, 4constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, 5because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. 6I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. 7It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. 8For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. 9And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight 10to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, 11having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 4:4-9

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

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The ministry of Paul is well attested to in scripture

through his letters which make up much of the New Testament.

These epistles, these letters reflect the diverse situations of each church

and the struggles Paul faced at different points in his ministry.

The Letter to the Philippians, which we heard from today,

was written from prison,

as Paul himself does not know what his future holds

and still he desires to share with the community the possibilities for joy,

even when the future is unknown

and the church at Philippi is struggling to be united in purpose.

I do not find myself relating to Paul very often,

but today I am going to take a page from his book

**and** the experiences of wise colleagues

I am not the first after all,

to search for a last word to share

as they prepared to leave a congregation.

Hear now, A letter to the Disciples of First Christian Jefferson City.

*Salutation*

From Sarah, minister of the gospel,

to all the saints of First Christian Church Jefferson City.

Grace and peace to you from our Creator God, Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

*Thanksgiving and Prayer*

I thank God for you, for your ministry, your partnership as we have sought to worship, grow, and serve in this community.

I am especially thankful for the relationships

that have allowed us to join in this holy work together.

As I prepare to depart this community,

I pray for you wisdom to face the unknown ahead.

Wisdom that comes from trusting the guidance of the Spirit,

and so I also pray for you time for prayer and discernment.

It is easy to give into the worry, the discomfort –

rushing ahead to the day when everything will be easier.

But I tell you, that day will not come with force or speed.

Therefore, I pray you will find yourselves aligned

with God’s will for you,

and in that, find peace.

Fulfilling God’s call won’t be easy,

I pray God will grant you the courage to claim who you are

and to live authentically as God’s faithful disciples.

*Gratitude / Past*

The future ahead is built on the foundation of a past.

 I have only experienced a fraction of that past,

but I am forever grateful for the opportunity

to be a part of the story

of First Christian Church Jefferson City.

I give thanks for your patience as I figured out what it meant to serve as your Associate Minister.

 As I experienced many firsts –

my first committal for Jim Jackson,

my first eulogy for Cummalene Carroll,

my first baptism for Lejla Harris,

my first wedding for Meghan and Joe Andrews.

And the firsts that fall into the daily life of ministry, unrecognized for what they were.

I give thanks for your vulnerability

as you allowed me to be present

in difficult moments and in celebrations

and everything in between.

For sharing your lives, your homes,

your hopes and your fears with me.

I give thanks for the times you embraced my new ideas,

often even with excitement.

For responding to my requests for help

supporting our children and youth

or help creating something random for my newest idea.

I am grateful for your patience when things did not turn out as expected.

And I give thanks that if you judged me when I returned from trips with tattoos, you did not share those judgements with me.

*Confession*

I acknowledge there are times I have disappointed you.

Our time together was not perfect,

but how could it be when we are just humans?

There have been times I have fallen short in my ministry with you.

I have stayed silent when I should have spoken.

I have spoken when I should have listened.

At times I have allowed frustration to guide me

when I should have led with compassion.

I acknowledge my limitations meant I could not be the minister

each of you needed all of the time,

 but I pray I was in the moments that mattered.

For the times I have made you feel slighted or ignored,

I ask your forgiveness.

May you know the limits of my attention were not personal.

I pray moments of disappointment and hurt

may be transformed by God’s grace.

Please know, even in the difficult times,

my prayer has been and continues to be

for your flourishing as beloved children of God –

as individuals and as a community.

*What is / Present*

When Paul wrote to the church at Philippi from prison,

he could not tell them what would happen.

When I imagined this time, my farewell,

I hoped for different circumstances.

I imagined sharing that God was calling me to somewhere new.

Not that God would first call me leave.

Yet, as always, God understands far more than I do.

I have realized, only in responding to this call to leave,

that it is hard for me imagine with joy and excitement

the possibilities of a new ministry, a new call,

when I am is so fully given

to the present circumstance and reality.

And so to, I believe it is for you.

Future possibilities are clouded

when we seek to fit them around present realities,

even when our future requires letting go of what we have.

While it was difficult to make the decision,

to recognize and accept that God’s call is for me to “leave”

and not to “go”,

 the movement of the Spirit has brought peace to me

 and I pray the same for you.

I have heard from you,

and have experienced myself

the anxiety and uncertainty of this present moment.

So, God’s Beloved, I commend to you in this season

**patience and rest.**

And yet I know these are gifts you want to rebuff.

We have been patient so long.

 Waiting for the return of stability, the familiar,

of people we miss and life together as community.

 Patience means letting go of the question of “when”

 and yet that is a constant cry of our hearts.

I pray you find reserves of patience to see you through because…

God is preparing to do a new thing here,

and rushing forward,

 without pausing to seek God’s guidance,

 to find clarity and unity of purpose

will not make it come any faster.

Speeding towards the future will come

at the sacrifice of lessons to be learned from the winding path.

Gifts that you will pass by if you travel the highway,

thinking only of your destination

 and not the journey there.

So I invite you to rest.

 In many ways it has felt like we have been at a standstill

But the reality is you have been running,

trying to keep up with the ever changing speed of a treadmill you can’t control.

We are tired.

You are tired.

And while we don’t like to sit in the discomfort of it,

there is much grief weighing on our collective souls.

 People we have lost,

traditions and hopes for the future that have been set aside.

In the whirlwind of change –

both within our congregation and

within the wider community and world,

 I pray you will do the work of grieving.

Do not forget that Jesus grieved and Jesus rested.

 Make time and space to go up to the mountain to pray,

to rest, to seek God’s will,

away from the crowds clamoring for all things

to be healed in a moment.

*Body of Christ*

I commend patience and rest to you because both are needed for the Body of Christ to flourish.

For each part of the body to be present to one another,

to know healthy relationships.

It takes patience to attend to the needs

not only of the eyes, the hands, the legs

but also the toes that provide balance,

the lungs that provide breath,

the liver that cleans the blood…

and every part in between.

To come together, working towards God’s will for this community,

 the body must have tools for working together

 …healthy, honest and open conflict

 …boundaries to guide in faithful living

 …relationships that connect you one to another

so that the whole is attended to,

and not just the parts most visible or vocal.

*Courage*

In my time with you,

I have made friends with courage, with bravery.

I have found courage in the shadows,

 not hiding but waiting for me to find her there

when I retreated in fear

The fog, the shadows of the unknown are thick

in this time of transition.

May you encounter courage here.

Not for the destroying of fears

 but to help you sit in the unknown, the discomfort, the grief.

Courage will meet you here

and invite you to hope, to dream,

 to imagine a new path.

And only when the time is right do I pray

 courage will spur you to find your way out of the fog.

Listen and attend to stirrings of the Spirit that will come.

*What Will Come / Future*

You already have the tools to do this.

The experience, the framework

to move into the future unknown to which God is calling you.

You have shown yourselves capable of difficult discernment,

as evidenced by the thoughtful ways you considered

how best to respond to both a gift – property from Lois White,

and a need – a lack of affordable housing in our community.

With intention and thoughtfulness, you as a community,

sought wisdom from others,

asked hard questions, and

made a decision that was not the one you expected to make.

The decisions ahead seem much larger

but I trust your ability to learn, consider, and decide,

with your focus centered always on God’s call.

Indeed, you have already begun.

You have laid out the framework for the work ahead of you.

The new mission, vision and values you recently approved

are your compass.

 Worship God. Growing in Faith. Serving Our Community.

 Growing closer to God to serve as you are called.

 Faithful.

 Serving.

 Compassionate.

 Fellowship.

And the strategic plan is your map.

 It will take you on the winding path,

as you share with one another

your stories, your needs, your gifts.

It is not to be rushed. But to be thoughtfully considered.

The discoveries will be worth it.

 New opportunities for ministry.

Knowledge of what is important and needed

in this community

Framework on which to build new staffing models

and provide support for you as lay leaders.

New, genuine, relationships.

 Built on connections you can’t even imagine today

And serving those who feel disconnected from the community

Improved communication so people will know about

the new ministries and opportunities for connection

Faithful communication, built on mutual respect and trust.

Renewed focus on worship that acknowledges a worshiping community that is not always in one place

and finds ways to empower you all

to share your gifts in praise of God.

These are part of God’s call for you,

but the future they imagine will not just appear.

Be patient with one another and with yourselves.

There is work to be done, yes,

but find the overlooks and scenic picnic spots to stop and rest.

 To remember and to grieve. To dream and to imagine.

To breathe.

And in each deep breath,

may your love for God and for one another overflow.

May you be filled with knowledge, discerning what is best

 to the glory and praise of God.

Approach your life together with prayer and supplication,

with thanksgiving

Let your desires be made known to God

And you shall know the peace of God,

which surpasses all understanding.

*Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me* and in others*, and the God of peace will be with you.\**

Let us pray.

God of peace,

We come this morning anxious and worried,

angry and confused,

and still we find moments of hope,

moments of joy,

moments of peace.

We pray today for our world.

For Ukraine.

For world leaders.

For those who have been ordered to take up weapons.

For those who are seeking safety and shelter.

For those who are unable to leave areas of danger.

For those separated from loved ones.

For those grieving those already lost to violence.

For those who are taking a stand for peace.

May they know your presence, your comfort and your strength.

We pray today for leaders everywhere.

Guide them to wise decisions and lead them to peace.

We pray today this specific community,

this congregation, this part of the Body of Christ.

Be with us in the grief of change and the anxiety of the unknown.

For the gifts of what has come before, we give thanks.

For the pain of what has been, we ask for healing.

For the growth and joy we have known,

may we find them etched in our memories

For the sin that has marred relationship,

may forgiveness be given and received

For the in between time,

we pray for rest and renewal

For the unknowns before us,

we pray for patience.

For the decisions to be made,

we seek Holy Wisdom.

For the winding paths we travel,

we seek guidance and direction.

For future blessings to come,

we hold on to hope.

For the doors that will open,

may we discern wisely.

For the new calls we will hear,

we pray for the courage to say yes.

For the changes to come, may we trust in...

God our Creator, present from the beginning,

Christ our Comforter, who knew the sorrow of good-bye,

Spirit our Guide, who surrounds us and calls us into the future.

May it be so. Amen