

Sharing in the Work of the Gospel©

Philippians 2:1-11, 19-24; 4:4-9

October 1, 2017

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Today, many churches are celebrating World Communion. We embrace our unity in Christ as we come to the table knowing that Christians all around the world are celebrating the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, as we are.

Some are taking communion at this same hour with us. Some were at the table many hours before us. And there are others who won't be in worship for their Sunday morning service for yet a few more hours.

But, regardless of the time, we take this day to remember that, though we have differences in some things, our trust in Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior makes us one. Though we are many, we come to the table as one family.

In our Scriptures today, the Apostle Paul writes these words of encouragement and inspiration to the church in Philippi. He tells them to rejoice in all things; rejoice always.

And he is writing those words from prison. Although most scholars believe that Paul was not in a dungeon prison this time, as he had been others times, he is not a free man. He is most likely writing this letter from Rome where he is under house arrest.

Paul does have a few more privileges under these conditions. It seems he has visitors who come and stay with him and he sends them back to the church family. He certainly is able to write quite a lot during this time.

But, we know that Paul has praised God in other situations too. After being beaten and thrown in the dungeon, he and Silas sang praises to God. Remember, the dungeon doors opened and yet, the prisoners stayed put. And because of all that, the guard found salvation and he too praised God.

Paul is saying to praise God in all circumstances – in every situation, rejoice! And he is saying that it will make his joy complete if the church will have the same kind of love; will be in unity, and have the same mind as Christ Jesus. And he goes on to tell what Jesus did so we would understand how we too should be – if we truly are going to be like Christ.

He talks about how Jesus was in the form of God, was equal with God, yet he set all that aside – he emptied himself, Paul says – to become like us, a human. He humbled himself and became like a servant. Jesus came, giving up all his glory, in order to sacrifice his life so we might have life - have salvation.

That's the kind of love and mind Paul is saying the people who are Christians – followers of Christ Jesus – should have. Hopefully, we do sense that unity as we think about the

church universal – Christians around the world – sharing in the bread and the cup that Jesus gave for all his followers to take in remembrance of him.

In our reading further down in Chapter two, we have this little paragraph where Paul talks about his associate, Timothy. Timothy is a young man and Paul mentored him and taught him what it means to be a leader and a servant of Christ.

Paul writes that there is no one like Timothy, who will be genuinely concerned for the welfare of the Philippians, no one more worthy to be sent to the congregation in Philippi who would serve them and help – no one he would prefer to send over Timothy, until he, Paul, can go himself.

He calls Timothy his son, because not only does he have full trust and confidence in Timothy's ministry ability, but he has a deep fondness for the young man, as well.

So, today is World Communion – a day to rejoice in our unity as Christians around the world. But it is also another significant day in the life of our own congregation as we say goodbye to a family who means a great deal to us.

Six years ago, a young man named Shaun Hardimon asked to come and talk with me. He was going through the training with our presbytery to become a Commissioned Ruling Elder (previously called Lay Pastor). He asked if I would consider mentoring him here in our church so he could have some hands on ministry experience. And I was honored to do so and happy that the Session agreed. Laura Parker worked in the office at the time and she and I nicknamed him "Probie" as he was a rookie in training. (A little CSI coming out of us).

And so we met Michele and we got to know them as a couple, as friends, and to know and trust Shaun as a leader. The more I worked with Shaun, the more I saw his genuine love for ministry, for the work of the church and for the people – young and old. As he had opportunities to preach we watched Shaun become more polished and experienced.

It made me feel proud to be his mentor and to have a part in helping him to become the fine pastor we know today. Little did we expect that he would end up asking to stay with us and work with us in our ministry here, when he was ready to be commissioned to serve a church. But he did.

Shaun knew that this congregation could only manage to compensate one pastor, yet he wanted to stay with us and work. "Just give me a plate of brownies every month," he laughingly said. And so we did.

I know for a fact that every time Shaun was given a monetary gift, he was more apt to put it back in the offering plate than he was to ever keep it.

Shaun Hardimon has worked with us, being a true friend and pastor to us – sacrificing time from family, time when he could just play or rest. He has been like a brother to me

as well as a colleague. He has been a pastor to me when I needed one. Because of Shaun, I was able to stay with my dad for several weeks when he was dying.

Shaun was always capable and made good, careful decisions, yet he was always careful to make sure I was in agreement with him. He tirelessly came to meetings, giving sound advice when it was appropriate.

We've had the honor of walking with Shaun and Michele when they had a difficult and sad experience in the adoption process and then we had the joy of celebrating with them when they finally got their precious daughter – Abby Hope. And we have loved watching her grow and seeing them become such wonderful parents.

It is sad to close a chapter that has been such a blessing, yet this is what the church is about, isn't it? We welcome people with open arms, with love and joy. We help them grow and learn and we walk with them and they with us. And often times we end up sending them out to continue the good work they started with us.

Of course, both Shaun and Michele had started their good work for the Lord long before they came to us. We are but one chapter in their journey of faith.

But I can honestly say that I feel a little like Paul. Pastor Shaun Hardimon is like a brother, someone I trust and have full confidence in as he goes to wherever God leads him next. As he shares in the work of the gospel in new places. We can be sad to say good-bye, but we also should be honored to know we've had a place in Shaun's growth as a minister of the gospel.

It is World Communion day. It is a day when we rejoice that wherever we are, wherever we go, we are one family. We are united at the table that Jesus has prepared for us. We have a deep tie that binds us together forever.

I thank God for Shaun, for the blessing God gave us in him and his family. We pray for him to always know the strong presence and deep love of God in his life and we pray for that as well, for Michele and Abby too.

I thank God for all of you who do the work of the gospel all the time and who have the mind and the love of Christ. May God bless us as we follow his lead into the next chapter of the journey of faith for all of us. Let us rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say, rejoice!