

I Hold You in My Heart

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Philippians 1:1-11

August 8, 1999

“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel thus about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.”

What a wonderful expression of the joy of the Christian faith and life and especially of the way that the grace of God leads to such heartfelt love between a pastor and a congregation! The Apostle Paul writes to all the saints at Philippi, to all the members of the first church he started in Europe, “I hold you in my heart.” He had been away, and now he was in prison, but it was of them that he was thinking. He had been arrested, not for any crime but for the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and yet it was for and about them that he was praying. “I hold you in my heart.” This is not only a profession of love. This is also a profession of faith and a proclamation of the gospel. It communicates that good news because it is the result of that good news which we hear yet today.

All of us here today and all who join us by way of radio know too well that vast misery of the human race marked by broken hearts, empty hearts, and forgotten hearts. We all know too well the pain of loneliness, contempt, hatred, and neglect. We know too well the far reaching gone-wrongness of human life that infects and affects everything we do, for it is not only attested to by scripture, it is not only the subject of the great literature of the world, it is not only the stuff of the history of the rise and fall of many nations and empires, and it not only runs through the dark side of the history of the church, but it is also the story of our own lives. It is also the truth of our own being and history. It is the reality of our own past and, far more than it should be, of our present. It is the stuff with which we deal and struggle day in and day out. What great joy and wonder this is, that Paul could and did write words we all need and yearn to hear, “I hold you in my heart.”

Even he sensed that this needs some explanation, some accounting for, something to help us understand it. No sooner did Paul write, “I hold you in my heart,” than did he add, “for you are all partakers with me of grace.” He and they, you and I, have all received the grace of God almighty in Jesus Christ our Lord,

reclaiming us as his own, forgiving our sin, cleansing us of all unrighteousness, regathering us from our lostness, healing our brokenness, reconstituting community, overcoming alienation, and replacing estrangement with love. That is, Paul could hold the Philippians in his heart because—and only because—God was holding both him and them in the very heart of God.

And so God is holding us in the heart of God today. God holds us dear, you and me. God holds us close, not just Paul and the Philippians. God loves not only the stranger far away, whose name we do not know—yes, that is true, too—, God loves not only those who appear to, and whom we assume to, have everything together so much more than we do, and God loves not only the great and mighty, but God loves also you and me. And so it is that Paul could and did hold the Philippians in his heart. And so it is that you and I can and do hold each other in our hearts.

The love which we need we cannot achieve. The community we seek we cannot accomplish. The goal for which we were created eludes our every effort. We cannot love each other as we ought because we love ourselves too much instead. And yet, by the grace of God, Jesus Christ has captured our hearts and souls and minds and attentions, drawing us away from ourselves and toward him. Jesus Christ suffered to alleviate our suffering, he died so that we might be forgiven, and he was raised from the dead so that we, too, might live forever. How could Paul possibly have held the Philippians in his heart so long as his heart was full of himself? But when Christ drew Paul's heart out of himself and to the cross, both to be held and so to hold, there he found room for all the world.

Is your heart cramped? Is it small and tiny, hard and shriveled up, with no room for anything or anyone else? Does it need stretching and expanding? Does it need cleansing and renewing? Or is your heart broken, aching, hurting, smashed and torn beyond all human mending? Do you remember those who remember you? Are you, perhaps, forgotten by those whom you remember? Come to the cross of Jesus Christ. There you will see the heart of God breaking so that ours might be healed. There you will see the heart of Jesus Christ pouring out so that ours might be filled. There you will find grace, mercy, and peace such as the world has never known. There you will hear again the voice of God saying, "I will be their God, and they shall be my people." There God holds us in the heart of God, so that we might hold each other in our hearts.

That ancient promise has been fulfilled many times over. Now it is our turn. Now it is time for the old covenant to be made new in us. Now it is time for us to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, and hearing, so to believe, and believing, so to obey, and obeying, so to share the gospel with others.

Many things distract us. It is easy to believe that our deepest problems are financial, or political, or social, or medical, or racial, or something else. If that were the case, we could solve our problems with more money, better politics, a better society, better medicine, and racial harmony. But our deepest problem is theological. Our deepest problem is a problem of the heart, a problem of the brokenness of our relationship with God and so with each other. And this is a problem we cannot solve, a disease we cannot heal, a condition which we cannot set right. But here is the answer: God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. God provides for the love of God, working in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to take away our cold, hard hearts of stone and to replace them with living hearts, loving hearts, hearts that can and do work properly both to love God and so to love each other.

So it is that Paul was not bragging about how good he was. Paul was not exaggerating about his love for the Philippians. Instead, Paul was reiterating the content and the implications of the gospel which he had preached so many times before, the gospel by which and in which he believed and to which he had borne faithful witness, the gospel so well received by the Philippians, the gospel for which he was arrested and for which he was ready and willing even to die.

And if that were not hard enough, he knew that the Philippians, too, might soon die for their faith, the Christian faith. The Roman Empire would not long tolerate those who did not worship the state and the Emperors, who did not ascribe all power and glory to the Empire, who did not believe and obey the government. It was bad enough that Paul's imprisonment and suffering may have scared and scandalized the Philippians, making them question not only Paul but even Christ. If Roman guards held Paul in prison, maybe the gods of Rome were stronger than the God and Father of Jesus Christ. Seeing him suffer from a distance was bad enough. What would they do when the guards came after them?

Paul's confidence was not in the Philippians, but in the God who had made them and saved them. "I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." He believed in the perseverance of the saints not because of the saints but because God would provide for the preservation of the saints. Their first faith was not their own accomplishment but the work and gift of God. So would their final faith be not their own accomplishment but the gift of God to them and the work of God in them. God would not abandon them. God had not brought them this far only to desert them. No, God would see them through, even if it meant arrest and martyrdom. God would bring them safely home.

We in the church yet today would do well to follow Paul's lead here. We would do well not to place either our confidence or the lack thereof in the church, in the pastors, in the elders, in the deacons, in the congregation, in the presbytery, in

the General Assembly, or in any other part or component of the church. Instead, we believe in God. We trust in God. And so we place our confidence in God, in God's good will and plan for us, and in God's good work in and for us, already well begun though not yet completed. To do otherwise would be to guarantee disappointment. This is not to say that we should not work hard and strive to be obedient both in the unity of the church and in the mission of the church. But it is to say that we know the one who made us, we know the one who saves us, and we know the one to whom our gratitude is due.

Lest this confidence in God seem unjustified, Paul justifies it by his holding of the Philippians in his heart, which, as we have already seen, can only be the direct result of the grace of God. This, for him, was proof of the work of God. And the Philippians were all partakers with him of grace, he writes, not, as we might expect, in some grand and glorious ways. Instead, Paul writes, "you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel." His was a remarkable faith and intellect, that could both believe and understand that his being locked in prison was by the grace of God! I think most of us would take it the other way. But he knew that God had put him there for a reason, so that it would work not to the shame or diminishment of the gospel but for the proclamation and advance of the gospel.

And the church at Philippi shared Paul's imprisonment with him by holding him in their hearts and prayers. They shared it with him by giving him gifts. And they shared it with him by defending and confirming the gospel. Had Paul been attacked for his preaching? So had Jesus been attacked for his preaching. Had Paul been arrested for his faith? So had Jesus Christ been arrested for his faith. Would Paul be executed for the gospel? So had Jesus Christ been executed for the gospel. Would death be the final end of Paul? Jesus Christ has been resurrected, raised to a new and different life as the first fruits of a promised large harvest of resurrection. Did all that Paul was suffering in any way count against, negate, or invalidate the gospel? No, not at all! Given what Christ had suffered, how could those who would follow him expect any better? Apparently the Philippians were sharing in the hard work of defending and confirming the gospel of Jesus Christ, in the face of the hard and shameful reality of Paul being in prison, and Paul regarded this as sharing in the grace of God.

Paul speaks very highly of the Philippians and so does them great honor. Of course, he was not merely reporting on what had already been or even reflecting what then currently was the case. He was also encouraging them for the hard days yet ahead. He was telling a great truth in order to help them to live up to it. And the grace of God has been working through his words to help the church ever since.

What a wonderful expression of the joy of the Christian faith and life and especially of the way that the grace of God leads to such heartfelt love between a pastor and a congregation! Paul writes to all the saints at Philippi, "I hold you in my heart." He had been away, and now he was in prison, but it was of them that he was thinking more than himself. He had been arrested, not for any crime but for the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and yet it was for and about them that he was praying. "I hold you in my heart." This is not only a profession of his great love. This is also a profession of faith and a proclamation of the gospel. It communicates that good news because it is the direct result of that same good news which we hear yet today.

So, as your pastor, I dare to take Paul's joyful words as my own, or perhaps I should say that I add my concurring voice to his, and, though I am not in prison, I joyfully say to you all as I return to the pulpit today: "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel thus about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel."

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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