

Work With What You've Got
Philippians 1:1-11
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
April 13, 2008
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I don't know how much you know or care about home computers. You might know that a great deal of the technology that any of our computers uses comes from some of the early research and testing done by a couple of drop-outs named Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak. These guys founded Apple Computers when they were 21 years old. Jobs has had a tumultuous history with the company, but no one can deny his passion and his innovative mind. Under his watch, the company has released the McIntosh line of computers, as well as the iPod and iPhone. His control over the company is so tight that a few years ago, when he was being treated for pancreatic cancer, none of the details were released until after his health returned, because everyone would have had a single question: if Steve Jobs leaves Apple, can Apple survive?

Now, as I've said, that is interesting to me as a user of the Apple products, but you might not really care. Maybe for you, I should ask, "What will happen to the Nittany Lions when, or if, Joe Paterno ever leaves Penn State?" Maybe you're old enough to remember how curious people were to see if *The Tonight Show* would survive after Johnny Carson retired. My point is this: often, when a founder or prominent spokesperson leaves a going concern, significant questions are raised about the possibilities for success or failure, right?

I ask those questions because they relate, at least in some way, to the scriptures that are at hand this morning. Last week, we studied about the beginning of the Christian Church in Europe. Do you remember Paul's vision of a man in Europe asking him to leave Asia and come and preach in what is now Greece? And do you remember Paul, Timothy, and Silas leaving Troas and winding up in Philippi, where they preached the gospel to a woman named Lydia, who became the first Christian in Europe? As we discussed last week, Paul and his companions began a church in Philippi, and it became an important church.

We know Paul started that congregation, and we know that he stayed there for a while. We know that he visited that church on several occasions, and we know that the congregation was among Paul's favorites. But time passes, and now an interesting situation presents itself: Paul, the founder of the church in Philippi (a Roman colony), is in a jail cell in Rome. He has started a number of churches around the world, and his preaching has raised such controversy that he's been arrested and is being held for trial. And while in that prison in Rome, he writes to his old friends in Philippi. We can't know this, of course, but it seems logical to me that several questions might be running through the mind of the church leaders when they hear of Paul's arrest and imprisonment. "What's going to happen to Paul? We love him so much!" That makes sense. Maybe they asked, "What's going to happen to us? I mean, if being a Christian like Paul is enough to get you arrested, and if Paul taught us how to be Christians, are we in

for trouble here?” And there may have been those in Philippi who were asking, “So this is what faith in God gets you? What’s the use? If someone like Paul is tossed into jail, why bother with anything?”

As we begin our study of this letter to the Philippians, let me suggest that while we don’t know if any of the questions were running through the congregation, it is entirely possible that this was the case, and it seems to make sense when we read the beginning of this letter.

I should point out at this point that Paul knew he was writing a church in Philippi, and he presumed that the church would read his letter out loud. But he never in his wildest dreams thought that he was writing scripture! He thought he was addressing his dear friends. Before we listen for God’s word for us, then, we hear the words of our brother Paul to the community in Philippi.

I love how this letter begins. Do you remember what we said last week about the population of Philippi? It consisted of a lot of Roman army veterans and other people with experience from around the world. How these people must have loved their titles, because Philippians is the only Epistle addressed to a church along with bishops and deacons. It reminds me of the times I’ve been in Africa where there is such great formality in matters of rank and privilege. I’ve been in meetings where we have had three people present, but four or five officers. One of the people is the Chair, and another is the deputy chair and the recording secretary, while the third person is assistant to the chair and the treasurer. So these Philippians must have enjoyed being formal...and Paul instructs them a little bit, while referring to their own titles, but saying that he and Timothy are servants – literally, “slaves” of Christ.

Right from the beginning of the letter, Paul makes it clear who is in charge – it is God the Father, Son, and Spirit. Paul, Timothy, and the Philippians? They are secondary at best. Paul doesn’t even mention, in fact, the circumstance of the beginning of the church in Philippi. He simply says that “God, who began a good work in you, will bring it to completion.” You may remember that last week, when we read from the book of Acts about the establishment of the church, that “the Lord opened Lydia’s heart to hear what was said by Paul”. This just continues that theme. It’s not about me, says Paul. Sure, I happened to be there, but God began it – and neither God nor you need me to finish what God has started amongst you.

What does that “finishing” look like? Well, after Paul shares his joy and gratitude with the church, and he tells them how much he loves them. And then he tells them what it is that he prays for them: that they might be a people of love. Not love for Paul, not love for each other, but love that is powerful and strong and love that shows up in the lives of the people around them. So this thing that has started with God now has something to do with the Philippians and their actions, too. They have a responsibility to grow into the kind of Christians who are “pure and blameless”. The word for “blameless” there means essentially, you don’t stumble yourselves, and you don’t cause anyone else to stumble. That’s the kind

of loving Christians into which Paul trusts the Philippians to grow. It starts with God's action in Jesus Christ, and it ends with God's completion on the day of Jesus Christ, but in the meantime, the church is called to act in the Spirit by growing into that kind of a loving body, no matter what has or has not happened to its earthly founder.

This is how the letter to the Philippians begins. And now you might have on your lips the most profound theological question of all time: So what? I mean, as I said earlier, Paul didn't think he was writing scripture – he was simply dictating a note to some friends. What connection is there to your life or to mine?

I wonder if there is anyone in the room this morning who has ever asked themselves the question, “well, what am I going to do now?” I wonder if there is anyone who as ever thought, “you know, this is not how I thought that things would turn out...somehow, I always thought that things would end differently...but now the marriage is over...the illness has returned...our relationship is fractured...the job is finished...and what's happening now? How am I supposed to live and believe now?”

OK, I'll be honest. I don't wonder if anyone in the room has ever asked those questions, because I know that virtually everyone in the room has lived in that tension. Just as the church in Philippi started strong with the presence of Paul and the conversion of Lydia and the earthquake and the jailer and his family becoming believers and the healing of the slave girl...just like that, you've been on a roll in some area of your life. And then, Paul gets tossed into prison. People start to say things about those who follow Jesus. And the Philippians wonder what's going to happen. So, too, you have had that period of certainty in your life open up into a time of doubt or confusion.

I have good news for you, my friends. It's not over yet. Your life is a work in progress. It started with God, and the one who started this great thing in you will bring it to a conclusion. I don't say that to be flip, and I don't want to cheapen whatever difficulty you're in the midst of right now, but I do need to say that it is fundamentally good news: your story is not finished. God is still at work in and through you.

So the ultimate results are not up to you. That's not in question. A great question, however, might be, “Are you moving forward today in love?” Is the life that you are leading a life in which you are growing in your ability to be pure and blameless? Are you seeking to make yourself an instrument that does not cause anyone else to stumble? In other words, are you the kind of person who is there to build up and encourage others? Paul says to the church in Philippi that God longs to produce a harvest of righteousness...and that God will use the Philippians as the place where these fruits grow. I am bold enough to say the same thing to you: that God intends to use you as an agent of blessing to the people around you.

Now if you are one of those folks who is in the midst of doubt; if you are struggling with ideas like, “How is God going to use me, when I'm not even sure

what the heck I believe”, then this may sound a bit presumptive on the part of the preacher. God intends you to bless others. But that’s what I’m saying – I’m saying it to those of you who have never felt closer to God in your lives, and I’m saying it to those of you who question why you are even here this morning. In any case, I, like Paul, am confident of this very thing: that He who has begun a good work in you will carry it on to completion in the day of Jesus Christ.

So today, if you struggle with doubt or if you are unsure as to where God will take you next, join me in praying that God will continue the work that he has begun in you. Ask God to show you his mercy. Remember that God delights in his love for you. And ask the Lord to show you, today, one small sign of the fruit that is growing in the lives of people around you. And then look for it, and celebrate it. Because that’s what God does in people like you. Amen.