

The Network of Faith  
Philippians 4:15-23, Acts 28:11-16, 30-31  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
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I am amazed and thankful when I consider the power of the Christian Community in the New Testament church. I am challenged and humbled when I compare that “network of faith” to the connections that we see in and across the Body of Christ in our own experiences.

Look at the reading that we’ve had from Acts, for instance. Here is Paul, the Apostle, and he’s under arrest. He’s heading to Rome where he’ll defend himself in the court of the Emperor. So far as we know, he’s never been to Rome. But when the Christians in Rome hear that Paul is in the way, they stream out to meet him. Luke, the author of Acts and Paul’s traveling companion, says that the Christians from Rome came all the way out to the Three Taverns to greet them.

Wow. All the way from Rome to the Three Taverns, eh? So, what does that mean?

It means that when the believers in Rome heard that Paul and his companions were on the way, they left the city – most likely on foot – and traveled forty miles simply to welcome them and to encourage them. Forty miles! Walking! To say, “Hang in there, buddy! We’re praying for you, Paul!”

Sit on that for a moment. Forty miles. That’s a little further than it is from here to Steubenville OH. Now I’m about to ask perhaps the most pointless question I’ve ever asked in a sermon: for whom – or for what – would you walk to Steubenville?

Has anyone here ever walked to Steubenville? What about Uniontown, PA? I didn’t think so. Me neither.

Walking to Steubenville. What a waste of time. What good would it do? I mean, really. Those people who went out to see Paul at the Three Taverns – what was that about? Couldn’t they have used their time more effectively? What’s the big deal?... “Uh, Hi Paul! Dare il benvenuto all’Italia!” Doesn’t make sense to me.

During the summer of 1998 you sent me on a “Pastoral Exchange” to Malawi, and I lived with and followed the Rev. Ralph Mnensa, who was a better follower of Jesus than I could ever hope to be. One morning we got up at the crack of dawn because, Ralph said, we were going to visit the Christians at the Chaone prayer house on the top of the Chaone mountain. We drove the car to the foot of the mountain and parked, and then we started to climb. We walked up the mountain at least three hours, and then across a plateau. We got to the prayerhouse in the late morning, where we were welcomed by singing and

dancing. We had worship, where I learned that it had been more than three years since a pastor had last visited that congregation. They fed us lunch, and then we baptized some babies, officiated a few weddings, ordained some elders, and visited the sick. It was after dark by the time we got down the hill. I would guess that we'd walked maybe twenty miles one way.

If it hadn't have been for Ralph Mnensa, I would have said, "Gee, too bad there aren't any roads that lead up there. I bet it's nice on top of that hill." But Ralph led me to see that those folks needed to know that the church had not forgotten them – and so we walked. And he was right. And I would do it again in a heartbeat – because I learned something that day of the value of Christian community.

But I've never walked to Steubenville. We just get caught up in our own stuff. We forget. We get busy. *Dancing with the Stars* is on, for crying out loud! And who am I to be welcoming Paul, anyway? Who am I to be bringing community to anyone?

But that's not how Paul saw it. He writes from the prison in Rome to his friends in Philippi. He's surrounded by the community there – including people who work in Caesar's household. He has a ministry there in Rome – a ministry of teaching, preaching, writing, and a ministry of presence – of simply being there.

And from this cell, he writes to Philippi. Why? Because they, in some way, "get it". He says as much in Philippians 4:15-20, when he says, "You know, when I got to Europe, you welcomed me in a way that no one else did. You supported me when it was tough. Heck, you even sent Epaphroditus to visit me here in Rome...You know how much the care and concern of another human being can mean. You know that it matters." After all, the Philippians were the first people in Europe to become Christians. They knew that they were on the outside of the culture, looking in. They appreciated the fact that every day, day after day, every one of their neighbors was bowing to a different god and worshipping another idol. They knew that if the Christian Community didn't stick together, didn't work on maintaining its ties, didn't work on loving and appreciating each other, then the Christian Community would simply dry up.

Do you see this in the New Testament church? A body of people that is composed of slaves and centurions, wealthy women and young men, Jews and Greeks, members of every race and ethnic group? This is a group of people who saw themselves not as a new Philosophy that posed the question, "Do you agree with us?", because the Way of Jesus is not fundamentally an intellectual exercise. They saw themselves as a social movement, and so they asked anyone who was around, "Do you want to join us?"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Willimon, in his *Interpretation Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988) does a much better job at getting this point across than I do here).

Here's an example of the distinction between an intellectual exercise and a social movement. I want to make it clear now that I'm not advocating for any particular cause or candidate. But when John Kerry was running for President, he put out a series of ideas and asked people to buy into them. "Agree with me," he basically said. "I'm right on this." Maybe, maybe not. But look at the candidacy of Barack Obama. It is not so much a conversation about specific ideas, but rather a movement. My hunch is that many of the people who support Obama can't really say much about what he believes, only that they like him or want to be a part of what he's doing. The reverse is also true – that many of those who oppose him aren't quite sure what they disagree with – they just aren't for him. You see – a social movement, not an intellectual exercise.

At its root, that's what Christianity is – it's a coming together of people around a way of life centered in what Jesus has done, is doing, and will do. It's a following. A joining. A journey. And one of the key characteristics of that movement is that it is always reaching outside of itself and always inviting others to come in. The Way of Christ seeks to be obedient to the Lord by means of graceful and joyous service to God and to neighbor.

So this letter from Paul to the Philippians was the first letter I read on Thursday – a letter of hope and joy, a letter expressing the need for Christians to come together and to lean on each other and to look for ways to bring people into the movement.

The second letter I read on Thursday was from a local church – a Catholic church, to be a little more specific. It turns out that this congregation has recently had a confirmation class, and one of the people in the confirmation class is a young woman who was baptized here as a baby when her family lived in Crafton Heights. They do not live in the Heights any more, and she has chosen to follow the Way of Jesus through that congregation, which is closer to her home. And the letter from that church said, "Brothers and sisters in Christ: this believer has been confirmed in our parish. You baptized her, and now we're helping her to continue the walk in faith."

Isn't that great? A sister in the Lord, moving forward in the Way! Hallelujah! And thanks to that church for letting us know! That was the second letter I read on Thursday, and it seemed to echo the first – the letter to the Philippians.

The third letter I read was from a local pastor who has recently left the Presbyterian Church (USA) for another denomination. It was written to another church – a Presbyterian church – and he was trying to convince them that they, too, should leave the PCUSA. It is a letter filled with anger and bitterness, a letter that attacks the body of Christ and tears it down.

So my devotional reading on Thursday had a letter celebrating the network of faith and encouraging people to be united. My mail on Thursday had one letter (from the Catholics!) that reflected the joy and unity lifted up in Paul's writing and one letter (from the Presbyterians!) that revealed that we so often just

don't get what it's about. A letter that revealed that there are times when we just want to be right – more than we want to be like Jesus.

So my letter-reading on Thursday leads me to conclude my exploration of Philippians with a couple of questions and an invitation.

What is our current understanding of what it means to be Christ-followers? What is the state of our own fellowship, or our participation in this social movement that Paul called “The Way”?

Are we happy with the way that things are in our congregation? Are we glad that we're better off than many, and that we have a few things going on? Are we sitting back waiting for people to come to us, expecting that the world – or at least the West End – is going to beat a path to our door because we are so effective at living like Jesus? Do we find it easy to say, “You know, he knows where we are. When he wants to get things right, he'll come and find me...”?

Be careful, beloved. Be very, very careful with this gift of Community that you have been given. We are not as strong as we think we are. At every turn, we have the opportunity to use our web of friendship and connections to bless or to exclude.

Rich Mullins, one of my heroes in faith, once wrote a song called “We are not as strong as we think we are.” In it, he laments,

We are frail, we are fearfully and wonderfully made ☐  
Forged in the fires of human passion ☐  
Choking on the fumes of selfish rage ☐  
And with these our hells and our heavens ☐ So few inches apart ☐  
We must be awfully small ☐ And not as strong as we think we are

Let me ask you to consider the state of the relationships in which you are involved. This message is called “The Network of Faith”, and I know for a fact that each one in this room has access to some sort of a network. Each of us as a series of connections and relationships, a framework that allows us to get through the days. Some of these personal relationships are stronger than others, but we all have some connection.

How are you using that network? Do you take the friendships that you have and use that time and energy to gossip and to attack other people? Do you use the web of relationships that the Lord has given you to build a wall around yourself, so that you can just relax, and isolate yourself, and know that whatever happens, you've got two or three friends who will love you and to heck with anyone else?

Or are you able to use that web of relationships – that network of faith – as a platform from which you can reach out and invite someone else in? Do you see what I'm asking? Are your Christian friends a safe haven that means that you don't have to spend any time with anyone who is not like you, or are they a presence and an encouragement to reach outside of yourself and invite someone

who is a little different – a centurion, maybe, or a slave. A woman of wealth, or a kid with a skateboard, or a man with too much makeup or a woman with too little clothing or a kid with the wrong set of parents or...you know what I mean. Are we hiding out with each other, or are we reaching out together?

Those are the questions. Here's my invitation: today, I'd like to personally invite you to reach out and make a relationship right. Walk across the aisle to someone you don't know well. When church ends, don't walk over to your best friend and complain about the hymns I picked or the way that last night's hockey game ended. Reach out to someone you don't know well and give to that person the welcome of Jesus Christ.

And don't just cross the aisle. I'm not asking you to walk to Steubenville. I'm asking you to walk across the street. Remember that the First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights is not here simply occupying space on a city block. We are the body of Christ, sent into the world to love and to serve those people that God loves. In the strength of our fellowship, we can do that. We can help each other to live the Jesus way. By God's grace, we will. Amen.