

“Aspirations”  
Philippians 2:1-18  
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The passage we're about to hear is one of my favorites in all of Scripture. It's the passage John and I chose for our wedding, as we pondered what sort of marriage we aspired to. It is the passage I turned to often in the months I was away from you this winter, as we all dwelt in the wilderness of not knowing what would happen here. Indeed, Paul's whole letter to the Philippians was my constant source of hope and courage.

It is poignant that Paul wrote this letter to his most beloved congregation when he was away from them, in prison, not knowing how his story would end. Indeed, Paul's words at the beginning of his letter were my constant mantra for you while we were apart:

“I thank God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy ... because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this: that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion ... And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with insight to help you to determine what is best ... [to produce] the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory of God.”

That was my prayer for you all along, as we waited, separated from one another. And we were separated, weren't we? Me, waiting in self-imposed isolation, feeling passive and fearful for a time much, much longer than I ever imagined ... you, the congregation, waiting in the dark, feeling disenfranchised and frustrated and voiceless ... and you, the Session, waiting under merciless pressure, silenced by attorneys and questioned by the church. I do not intend to dwell in the past today, but we must acknowledge honestly the wilderness we endured as a church.

But this is what I see now, that I could not see before: though we all felt separated and silenced in our season of discernment and worry, all of us were praying and waiting ... all of us were waiting for Christ to guide us. And I deeply believe that Christ *has* guided us through this wilderness. You may not

be in this place yet, but I want you to know that I feel at peace. I am sad – I will miss you more deeply than words can say. I grieve over the funerals we know are coming soon that I cannot lead, the weddings in the works that I cannot conduct, the babies I will not baptize, the work of mission and engagement and study and worship that I wanted to accomplish that I have left undone. But I feel like God has picked me up by the nape of my neck to say, “It’s time to go. Your call here in Lake Forest is now finished.” Would I have liked the ending to be different? Absolutely. And I deeply, deeply grieve with you the heartache this has caused here. And yet ... and yet I utterly trust that the promises of Scripture will be fulfilled. I have no doubt that Christ “who began a good work among you will bring it to completion.” And I utterly hope that “your love may overflow more and more, to help you determine what is best.”

We have spent these last three months looking back. No doubt we will all look retrospectively in days to come. But now in these last moments together, I urge us to look forward, just as St. Paul urged his people. And to do so, let us turn again to the timeless words of Scripture.

Philippians 2:1-18

“If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
 who, though he was in the form of God,  
 did not regard equality with God  
 as something to be exploited,  
 but emptied himself,  
 taking the form of a slave,  
 being born in human likeness.  
 And being found in human form,

he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.

“Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

“Therefore, my beloved, just as you have heeded me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

“Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. But even if I am being poured out as a libation of the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you – and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.”

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

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It may seem selfish of me to ask to do the Renewal of Baptismal Vows today. It will be a wild choreography, and take a lot of time, and, after all,

many of you already did this once this year, in January, as is our custom in the New Year here. But because I was still on leave then, I missed it. I also missed Christmas Eve, so at least I'm not asking you to sing Christmas carols today!

But in all seriousness, it is not because *I* missed the Renewal of Baptismal Vows that I long to share that with you now. Instead, today, on our last day together, I long for us to affirm the core of our faith, our identity in baptism. And as we do, I hope to leave you with three particular blessings.

First, as we renew our commitment to Christ in baptism, I wish for you this blessing: that you have confidence that no matter what, you will always be God's own beloved child. It is sometimes difficult, when we feel guilty or ashamed, or pitiful or vengeful. But I sincerely hope you know by now that you never have to prove yourself in God's eyes. I pray that you know in your deepest heart that God loves you unconditionally, utterly, as a mother loves her newborn child. God will never stop loving you. If you remember nothing else, I pray that you remember this: you are, and always will be, God's beloved child.

Second, as we renew our commitment to Christ, I wish for you this blessing: that you trust that you do not do this work of life alone. God gives us one another, brothers and sisters in Christ, so that we do not stumble in isolation. I have seen this in you in so many ways. How in worship week after week after week, you lift up the joys of weddings celebrated and illnesses healed and grandchildren born. How week after week, you share the concerns of jobs lost and cancer diagnosed and loved ones struggling. How, behind the scenes, Stephen Ministers listen, and Deacons bring flowers and pour coffee, and Prayer Shawl ladies knit, and Chancel Guild guide weddings and funerals, and the choir and Rummage sorters and Bible study groups build communities that become much more than the work they do. And in all of these things, we become family to one another, brothers and sisters in Christ. I rejoice at your willingness to "own" this – our need for one another - especially in our precious "bubble," where we're all supposed to be "fine, fine, fine." If you

remember nothing else, I pray that you remember this: you are never, ever alone on this journey.

And third, as we renew our commitment to Christ today, I wish for you this blessing: the aspiration to keep growing to be Christ-like. This is my *deepest* hope for you, and I want to share why it matters so much to me that you continue to grow in Christ.

Let me start by saying that it's precisely because God wants us to be our best selves, and knows our weaknesses and limits, that God sent Jesus to model what our best humanity can be. God sent Jesus – God's own Son – to show us what it means to be a child of God.

How do we aspire to be like Christ? I love Paul's words to his beloved Philippians:

“If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

In other words,

- To aspire to be like Jesus means, in our striving, to seek “encouragement in Christ” and “consolation from love” instead of chasing after money or beauty or titles, instead of racing after “selfish ambition or conceit.”
- To aspire to be like Jesus means, when we're wronged or in conflict, to seek “compassion and sympathy” instead of exacting vengeance, or throwing people under the bus, or giving up and walking away.

- To aspire to be like Jesus means, when we're at odds with each other, to seek to "be of the same mind, with the same love, in full accord" instead of being so sure that we're right.
- To aspire to be like Jesus calls us, when we're choosing priorities, to look to "the interests of others" instead of putting ourselves first.

All of which is ambitious, isn't it? Yet if that weren't enough, Paul presses his beloved congregation further, like a coach who knows what his team can really do. He says:

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
 who did not regard equality with God  
 as something to be exploited,  
 but emptied himself,  
 taking the form of a servant ...  
 humbling himself even to obedience to the point of death -  
 even death on a cross.”

This is our greatest blessing, and our highest aspiration: to model ourselves on Christ's own radical humility. It is as counter-cultural as we could get. Yet to model ourselves on Christ means exactly that. For most of us, thank God, that would never mean bodily martyrdom. But it *does* mean the willingness to lay down anything and everything at the throne of grace. To be willing to set down our ambitions, to be willing to let go of control, to be willing to put ourselves utterly in service to God: this is what having the mind of Christ looks like. To be willing to set down the fortunes that we could easily cling to, and give ourselves away in mission and service: this is what having the mind of Christ looks like. To be willing to let go of the desire to be the most popular church and instead desire to be the most faithful, self-emptying, servant church: this is what having the mind of Christ looks like. And just as Christ was awarded the ultimate blessing of God, the crown of life replacing the crown of thorns, so will the victory be ours.

That is my wish for you. As I set down my ministry here, I have nothing but trust that you will always be God's deeply beloved children. I have

nothing but confidence that you will continue to care for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, and pride that you will continue to care for others far beyond this place. And I have nothing but hope for you - that you will keep aspiring to have the mind of Christ.

So as I prepare to leave you, let me close not with my own words, but St. Paul's to the Philippians, his most beloved congregation:

“Therefore, my beloved, just as you have heeded me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast: that I can boast that I did not labor in vain.” Amen.

#### BENEDICTION:

Beloved in Christ, our service now begins. Go out into the world in peace.

I have to interject, it was 12 years ago this week that I interviewed in this place - when rummage was being set up. After the reception in the tent, if it's not thundering and lightening, we will be doing rummage set up and if you have any energy left in you, please help.

And, let me be symbolic. This stole is a sign of our yoke, one to another – my tie to you, this congregation. My work with you is done. My heart will always be with you. So, go out into this world in peace; go out knowing that you are a child of God; go out knowing that you do not walk alone; go out knowing that your highest aspiration will always be the mind and heart of Christ our Lord. And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the power of the Holy Spirit propel you this day and forevermore. Alleluia!

Amen.