

How Can I Keep from Singing?
Philippians 1: 3-11

Tandy Gilliland Taylor
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34 years ago last Monday, on September 13, 1987, I was ordained as a pastor. The service was in downtown Atlanta, at Druid Hills Presbyterian Church, a church similar to Triune: in the wintertime, they hosted a night shelter for 30 men; they had a weekly art therapy group; they held small group meetings of folks who lived in boarding houses across the street from the church. Even the church building was similar, with the high ceilings, creaky wood floors, and offices housing local community ministries. My husband David was ordained that day too; we both served that congregation for several years, before moving to rural Virginia, where we served for 9 years as co-pastors of a tiny church in Nelson County, where the Waltons lived, of the TV show. That little church had been founded in 1746; while we were there, we celebrated its 250th anniversary. Our two children Sam and Emily were born in Charlottesville.

Next, we moved to Mauldin, because the Presbytery, our regional body, called us to be co-pastors again, to start a brand-new church from scratch. Within 6 months of opening for public worship, 142 people had committed to this congregation, so we were officially chartered as Eastminster Presbyterian Church in Simpsonville. And as it turns out, that chartering service was held on September 19, 1999, 22 years ago today.

About a month ago, when Jennifer asked me to preach today rather than another day, she had no idea that these two anniversaries of mine fall within this week.

For those of you who may not know, I'm retiring soon; today, I'm preaching my final sermon, and next Sunday is my last Sunday.

As I reflect on these past 34 years, I'm grateful beyond measure for the rich relationships, the significant conversations, and the holy moments along the way. It's humbling to reflect on what God has done through me, and it's downright inspiring to see what God has done in spite of me, in spite of my shortcomings and inconsistencies. And I'm grateful for the ways that God has sustained me through the difficulties along the way, the seasons of doubt and fear and exhaustion. God's grace has blessed me beyond measure; and God's grace has seen me through the tough times.

And of course, on this day, I reflect specifically on my almost-five years here at Triune. I'm ever so grateful that God brought me here, to weave my life together with yours. I'm grateful for our worship services rich in the spirit of God, grateful for the many friendships of support and encouragement, grateful for the healing power of community. You have inspired me, with your reliance on God in the midst of great struggle, your ability to forgive yourself and others, your ability to pick yourself back up time after time. I'm grateful for the many holy moments I have experienced with you, whether we are celebrating communion in worship, or studying the Bible in the Sunday morning class, or walking in the woods together at Conestee, (or sharing our burdens and joys in the LGBTQIA support group), or celebrating the gift of someone's life in a memorial service, or praying together in a hospital room or in the dining hall or even over the phone. I'm grateful for the mighty and mysterious ways that God is right

smack in the middle of all of this, giving all of us comfort and guidance, wisdom and encouragement, hope and companionship.

And I'm grateful for each person on this fabulous staff, and the particular gifts and strengths each one dedicates to God and to our community. I'm grateful that Deb hired me, and grateful that Jennifer is the right person for this chapter in Triune's life. I've learned so very much from this staff, about deep compassion and the need to avoid toxic charity. I've learned about trauma-informed approaches, the necessity for healthy boundaries, the importance of self-care, and the gift of humor in the midst of the heaviness. I will miss you, staff and congregation.

Two thousand years ago, the Apostle Paul had a special relationship with the congregation at Philippi; the intimate, affectionate tone of his letter to them leads one biblical scholar to write that Paul had "fallen in love" with that congregation. The church at Philippi was predominantly Gentile; it was marked by the leadership of women playing various significant roles; and it was noted for its repeated acts of generosity – does that sound like some church you might know? 😊 Hear now these words of Paul to this special congregation, from Philippians 1: 3-11:

³I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

⁷It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

In this beautiful text, Paul's gratitude and affection overflow. He appreciates the significant partnership he shares with this congregation, in living out the Gospel. He shares his strong conviction that God, who began this good work within them and through them, will continue to be faithful to them in the future and will complete this good work in the fullness of time.

Paul then shares his prayer for this special group, a prayer that their "love might overflow more and more with knowledge and insight to help you determine what is best". As biblical scholar Fred Craddock writes, Paul prays that they might "grow and mature in love – not a love that is sentimental, or easy, or shrinks from truth-telling or tough engagements, but a love that is joined to knowing and understanding, to probing and discerning, to putting itself to the test in real-life situations and making moral choices in

matters that count.” This love is not sappy; it’s clear-eyed and courageous in shaping our lives for faithful living out of the Gospel.

The second half of Paul’s prayer is a bit more confusing for us, because it says, “so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless.” Well, we all know that not a single one of us is pure and blameless, so what could Paul mean by this? For a clue, we can go back to verse 6, where Paul says, “I am confident that God who began this good work within you will complete it”. So, one way to understand this is that it is God’s faithfulness that will complete this purifying work within us, not our own goodness. As we grow and mature in God’s love, God will shape our lives with wisdom, and that in turn purifies us for God’s holy purposes. After all: who is in a position to cast blame? Only God, and God will be faithful to complete the work that God began in us.

So today, just as Paul wrote so long ago to his dear friends, I say to you, my dear friends:

³I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that God who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

And I pray that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.”

As Paul prayed for this congregation from afar, I will pray for you in my absence from you. Several of you have asked if I can still come to worship here, or still come to the Bible study class just not as a teacher, but I will need to stay away, as Deb has had to stay away, not because we don’t love you, but as a professional courtesy, to give your next pastors the emotional space to bond with you. Deb and I can’t hog you all to ourselves; we need to share you, that others may have the chance to fall in love with you. ☺

One final theme of this text is joy. It’s really quite remarkable, when we remember Paul’s circumstances: he is writing this letter from prison! He could easily be experiencing doubt, or despair, or even bitterness, yet he is overflowing with joy. Just like the love that Paul describes is not sappy and spineless, the joy that Paul expresses here is not some shallow denial of the difficulties of life, but rather is a joy that God gives, even in the midst of the heartaches and evil we face in life. Paul sees beyond his current circumstances to the bigger picture of God at work in mighty and mysterious ways, behind the scenes, working to heal and redeem all of creation. Paul claims the joy of Easter, year-round – that sure knowledge that evil and death do not have the final word; God has the final word. As powerful as evil seems to us, and as final as death seems to us, love is stronger, God is stronger.

Paul didn’t write the lyrics of the song that Kristin is about to sing, but it seems to me that he could have. The first verse goes like this:

*My life flows on in endless song
Above earth's lamentation.
I hear the real, though far-off hymn
That hails the new creation.
Above the tumult and the strife,
I hear the music ringing;
It sounds an echo in my soul
How can I keep from singing?*

The refrain includes these words:

*No storm can shake my inmost calm
While to that rock I'm clinging.
Since love is lord of Heaven and earth
How can I keep from singing?*

So my prayer for you this day includes the prayer that you can hear that real, though far-off hymn, that hails the new creation, that new creation we learn of in Revelation chapter 21, where there is no pain, no sorrow, no evil, and no death. That new creation that is brought into being, not by a God of condemnation or punishment, but by the living God of Love, who is Lord of heaven and earth. Thanks be to God, forever and ever, Amen.