

# What Really Matters

December 8, 2024

Philippians 1:3-11

Luke 3:1-6

The Apostle Paul was, it seems, accustomed to repeat himself. In chapter three of this letter, having spent some time telling the Philippians things he'd already told them, he wrote, "To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a source of steadfastness." After that, he told them some more things... that he'd already told them.

In some ways I can safely say that I emulate the Apostle Paul. Or in at least one. I repeat myself.

I'm pretty sure I've told you that I repeat myself before... probably in that sermon I titled, "Repeating Myself."

No surprises today, I'm afraid.

We don't know exactly when Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians, or what city he was in. He was in prison, but that doesn't tell us much. In Second Corinthians, he wrote that he had "far more imprisonments" than some other people with whom he was in conflict. Apparently he had the capacity to annoy local authorities with his preaching – and he had the will to do so rather than stay safe and silent.

While it's no surprise to find Paul imprisoned, he did set a different tone in this letter. For one thing, it sounds like he'd been held longer than he had previously, long enough for the Philippians to hear about it and start worrying about him, long enough for them to worry about his companion Epaphroditus as well. In the first century, jail was not a punishment. People were held for trial and after trial to await punishment, and Paul had experienced "countless floggings" in his career. This time, though, the possibility of execution loomed. "Living is Christ," he wrote in verse 21. "Dying is gain."

In the midst of all that, Paul wrote what is safe to describe as the most joyful of his letters, at least the ones we have. This is no Second Corinthians, full of contention and conflict. This is no Romans, dedicated to a thorough explanation of his ideas. This is not even Philemon, encouraging a friend to do something extraordinary. In Philippians, Paul rejoices in the faithfulness and compassion of this congregation he has loved and cared for.

As Carla Works writes at Working Preacher, "Joy permeates this letter. Paul will make use of the language of joy or rejoicing sixteen times. The apostle can have joy in the midst of suffering because of his confidence in God's work through Christ. His joy is wed to God's activity rather

than to his own personal circumstances. Joy is an appropriate theological response. It is not joy because of suffering, but joy because those who cause the suffering will not have the last word.”

Joy is the first of things that really matter.

Another thing that really mattered, and really matters now, is the presence and support of other people. As Cheryl Lindsay writes at UCC.org, “Paul’s letters to the churches of his era and to the church today, remind us, across time and distance, that our faith is shared. Our journey is communal. If we are called to be a righteous branch, we recognize that branches are connected to a tree, bush, or vine.” Over the course of the letter to the Philippians, Paul mentioned four of his comrades in the gospel by name: Epaphroditus, Timothy, Euodia, and Syntyche. In fact, Paul routinely named other people as he wrote his letters, either because he wanted to greet them specifically in the church to whom he wrote, or because he was passing along the blessings of people with whom he was working at the time.

What really matters? Don’t do it alone. You don’t have to. And you shouldn’t. Get together, and stay together.

What else matters? Paul named something else in this one-sentence prayer that closed today’s reading: “And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what really matters, 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.”

Love. Love matters. Love *really* matters. Love. Agape. Hesed. Aloha. Love really matters.

This is the love that puts someone else’s welfare and interests at or above your own. This is the love that not only knows that we don’t have to do God’s work alone, this is the love that doesn’t let someone else do God’s work alone, either. This is the love that Epaphroditus demonstrated by coming to Paul and getting sick. This is the love that Paul showed by sending the recuperating Epaphroditus home, not just for his benefit, but to comfort the Philippians who were worried about both of them.

This love is not a feeling, but it nurtures feelings, doesn’t it? This love is audible in words, and it is visible in deeds. This love is tangible in making change in the physical world. This love tastes like my friend’s favorite meal. This love has the perfume of blossoms after rain.

These things make us feel good. They make others feel good. This is what love is. And: it really matters.

Paul’s prayer didn’t stop there, though. As L. Ann Jervis writes at Working Preacher, “Paul calls for love that is discerning and courageous, not simply tolerating everything in everyone; love that has insight and wisdom; love that reflects the moral character of God as reflected in

Christ." I've said it before, love carelessly expressed may not comfort, may not heal. It may, in fact, annoy, irritate, and mislead. People who dearly loved me have given me some real clinkers of Christmas gifts over the years. I love the people, but I do occasionally wonder how they thought I'd like... you know, that.

Christmas gifts are one thing. Day to day gifts are another. How often do we take on some regular job in the household firmly believing that we are providing relief or relaxation to someone we love? How often did we take it on because, well, it's easier to do it ourselves than to share it? How often did we take it on because it's something we were good at and the other person wasn't, and we just couldn't be bothered to teach it?

How often do we find ourselves unintentionally limiting the roles our loved ones can take on or the skills they can learn?

Did we ask?

It turns out that knowledge matters when we set out to love. It turns out that we can lovingly do exactly the wrong thing. It turns out that ignorance isn't loving. Shouldn't we care enough to ask?

Yes. We should.

Care enough to ask. It really matters.

Care enough to observe, as well. That's where insight comes from. That's what allows us to make those inspired guesses about things that will delight those we love. When we pay attention to what pleases those we love, we can make better and better judgements about what will please them next. Insight isn't a gift that some have and some don't. Insight is something you build from experience, observation, and consideration. Insight, like knowledge, takes work.

Do the work. It really matters.

What really matters?

Joy. Joy matters. Joy in the grace of God that rises above the current circumstances. Joy matters.

Togetherness. Togetherness matters. Living out our calling from God in company with others, supporting one another in righteousness. Togetherness matters.

Love. Love matters. Sharing and caring for others as we would have them share and care for us. Love matters.

Knowledge. Knowledge matters. Asking when we do not know, so that we can love well.  
Knowledge matters.

Insight. Insight matters. Paying attention to those we love so that we can love well without  
asking every question. Insight matters.

Paul repeated himself. So do I. Because it's so important that we know what really matters, and  
that we do what really matters.

Love with knowledge and insight. Love together, not alone. Love God's creation, and celebrate  
God's joy.

Amen.

*by Eric Anderson*