



A PETRI DISH OF LOVE

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Do you remember your first two-wheeler bike? I can still remember mine. I had had to limp along on my sister's hand-me down, and it didn't have gears or hand brakes. Plus it was purple. Money was tight at the time, so a new bike was out of the question. But we found a used one, and I was just as excited as if it was brand new, because it was a boy's dream bike, at least a boy living in the 70's. It was what we used to call a spider bike, a Schwinn fastback, with the big chopper style handlebars. It was green with a big banana seat that I covered with a metallic seat cover. Best of all, it was a five speed, and it had a gear shift on the center bar that looked super cool because it made you feel like you were driving a car. I thought that was the greatest invention ever – at least until the first quick stop I had to make.

I'm not particularly well balanced or coordinated, so bike riding wasn't easy for me to master. The one skill I really wanted to learn was how to ride with no hands. Kids who could fold their arms while they rode looked so tough. As you can see, I've always had high aspirations. It took me forever to acquire enough sense of balance to let go of my left hand, but I finally managed it.

Speaking of coordination on a bike – look at Dave and Julia! Glad you guys could make it.

INTERVIEW

Riding with someone else takes the experience to a whole new level. Both people have to have a good sense of balance. Both people have to contribute and carry their own weight. Both people have to lean in the same direction for turns.

So just imagine what it took for 35 people to ride together on the world's longest tandem bike. Coordinating that many pairs of legs would take great cooperation. Getting everyone started at the same time would take a lot of patience. And I'm sure even then you wouldn't take too many tight corners.

We just wrapped up our series called *The Whole Story: Moving Beyond Brokenness*. Think of that as learning to ride a bike by yourself. It was about owning your own stuff, maybe for the first time, learning some new skills and seeing where God is at work. It was a very personal journey.

This morning, we're starting a new series in the book of Philippians, and I like to think of it as a book about wholeness in tandem. It's about learning how to work out the Christian life together in community. So it's not disconnecting entirely from where we've been – it's just expanding it in a new direction.

If you took a survey asking Christians what their favorite book of the Bible, my hunch is that Philippians would come up fairly often. It's a short book, so it's easy to read through it all in one sitting. It's packed with memorable verses that contain great promises.

But most of all, Philippians is an encouraging, joyful letter. It lifts your spirits as it challenges you. And the message it contains about life together is every bit as relevant today as it was to its first readers.

The church at Philippi held a special place in Paul's heart. They had a lot of history together. Paul had actually helped start it, in a pretty unorthodox way. Luke tells us about his first visit there in the book of Acts:

Acts 16:13

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.

And that was the beginning. Paul started with the women. When you think of how male-dominated the Jewish culture was in the first century, it is remarkable that Paul would choose this strategy. It just shows how deeply the message of the gospel had gotten into his heart. He really believed it was for all people and not based on gender or status. And so from the very beginning, the church at Philippi was breaking down barriers and living out a message that included everyone.

Paul didn't have an easy time while he was in Philippi. This is the city where the crowd attacked him and his friend Silas, threw them in jail and put them in stocks. Afterwards, they were pretty much run out of town.

But the hardships seemed to cement the relationship between Paul and the church there, and over the years that followed, the church continued to support him on his missionary trips and came to his aid during the hardships he faced along the way.

At the time this letter was being written, roughly ten years later, Paul was back in prison, most likely in Rome this time. The Philippians had sent him some monetary assistance as well as one of their own to boost his spirits and give him the latest news. So the occasion for this letter was really the chance to write a thank you note. But Paul makes the most of the opportunity and crafts a letter that helps us catch Paul's vision of what it means to live out the truth of Christ in relationship with one another.

Let's take a look at the opening of the letter.

Philippians 1:1-11

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

All of that leads us into this last section where I want to spend our time this morning.

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ-to the glory and praise of God.

There's a story told about a man who wanted to become a monk. So he joined a monastery where he had to take a vow of silence. He was only allowed to speak two words a year. So he went through his first year and was called in to meet with the two head monks. They said to him, "So brother. You've no doubt given this a lot of thought. What would you like to say to us after your first year of silence? Choose your words carefully."

He looked at them for a moment then said, "Can't sleep." Then he got up and went back to his quarters. Another year of silence goes by and he comes in before his superiors again. They ask the same question. He says, "Bad food." A third year goes by. This time when he's asked the question, he says, "I quit," and walks out.

As he left, the one head monk turned to the other and said, "It's just as well. All he did was complain anyway."

Certain situations make it important to choose our words carefully. Paul was in one of those situations. As he sat in prison, he wasn't sure if he was going to be executed or set free. He didn't know if he would ever see the Philippians again. So he has to choose his words carefully.

To me, that adds weight to this prayer. Paul had to think about what he most wished for the Philippians. He wasn't casual about it at all. And it's a very rich prayer, full of purpose and full of Christ.

He begins by praying that their love will abound more and more. He wanted it to be increasing, growing in a crescendo. Think of a tiny creek starting up high on a mountain. As it flows downward, it is joined by other streams until it becomes this rushing cascade of water falling over itself on its way toward the sea. That's the kind of snowball effect Paul is hoping to see in the Philippians' love.

Maybe that sounds like a totally predictable wish – that we'd all love each other more. Who wouldn't want that? Kind of like wishing for peace on earth. A great sentiment, but not much substance.

I don't think Paul had time for sentimentality. He was wanting something very practical for this church. It gets back to a statement Jesus made when he was on earth. In the middle of a speech, he made this curious comment about the future:

Matthew 24:12

Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold.

There is evil in the world and it's on the rise. In other words, it abounds more and more, and the effect it has is to kill off love.

You can see this take effect in a couple of different ways. First, **the power of evil leaves us jaded**. We become cynical as we look around and see more and more bad things happening. What good is it to love God if he doesn't change anything? What good is it to love people if you only end up disappointed? Staying loving in a world that could care less is not an easy thing.

Secondly, **the wounds of evil turn us inward**. Coming off a series where we talked about so much brokenness, my initial thought about doing a straight study of a book of the Bible was, "If people are hurting this intensely in their own life situations, how can they possibly have energy to be interested in what Christian community should look like?" And I think that's part of Jesus' point as to how evil puts a chill on love. With the increase in wickedness comes an increase in suffering, and that can cause us to withdraw and focus only on our own problems rather than looking outward to love each other or God.

Those are the hard realities of wickedness, and Paul's prayer for the Philippians is in direct opposition. He is fighting for them in this prayer, not wanting them to be overcome. He wants to see their love abound more and more against the evil that is increasing more and more.

This is probably the point where some of you are saying, "Ok, I've heard this sermon a million times before. Christians are supposed to be loving. I already know that. We all

already know that.” Maybe it’s even instinctive – something we do naturally because we have the Holy Spirit. But have we given much thought to how we grow it? Is it abounding more and more for us?

Back in 2000, Time had a cover article on Tiger Woods. He was playing well, winning championships, making tons of money -- and yet he chose that time to rework his swing. He was rethinking his whole approach to the game. The article said this:

He has become...an obsessive student of the game who reviews videotapes of old tournaments for clues about how to play each hole. He works hard at building his strength and honing his shots. But what is most remarkable about Woods is his restless drive for what the Japanese call kaizen, or continuous improvement. Toyota engineers will push a perfectly good assembly line until it breaks down. Then they'll find and fix the flaw and push the system again. That's kaizen. That's Tiger. It's also Tiger's buddy Michael Jordan. No matter how good they say you are, Michael tells Tiger, "always keep working on your game."

No matter how well we think we know the story, we have to keep working on our game. Love is one of those take-for-granted qualities we kind of assume we’re good at. We aren’t always that intentional about developing it. But given the forces arrayed against us, it will take a prayerful focus and investment on our part to see that continuous improvement.

Do you remember petri dishes from science class? They have that stuff in the bottom of them that makes them a super rich bed of nutrients for growing colonies of microorganisms. The tiny cultures flourish – they abound more and more in the petri dish. In his prayer for the Philippians, Paul gives us a petri dish for growing love – this rich mix of nutrients intended to help love flourish.

Look again at the first part of his prayer:

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight...

Thinking the Love

We’re more inclined to want to “feel the love” than “think the love.” After all, love is emotional. We use the word when we have a certain warmth or soft spot in our heart, whether it is for a friend or a cheesecake or listening to bagpipes. When we say we love something or someone, we are usually referring to how we feel about it or them.

Now some of you may have read somewhere that love is a verb – not a feeling. It’s not just an emotion, it is also how we act. We have to show our love through what we do, whether we feel like it or not. And so we might concentrate on doing kind things for people and try to act in loving ways regardless of our emotions.

But Paul says growing love doesn't begin in feelings or actions – it begins in knowledge and insight. It begins with what we think. He's actually right in line with what psychologists say is true in general about us. Our thoughts lead to our emotions which in turn generate our behaviors. If we want to change how we're feeling or acting, the work begins with what we believe in our minds.

General knowledge might not lead us toward love, but the word Paul chose here is one he only uses when he's referring to spiritual knowledge. Specifically, he sees knowing God better as the base material we need for love to abound. Rather than focusing on what we're doing or feeling, we begin by turning our attention to him.

Why would that be the place to start? Three words:

1 John 4:16

God is love.

Love is a core characteristic of God. His very essence is where love finds its definition. So getting to know God is going straight to the source for more love. That's where we will find the truest picture of what it should look like. Conversely, if we're holding on to wrong beliefs about him, if our knowledge of him is lacking, our picture of love will be distorted.

Mark Buchanan wrote this: *What you know about God is either true or not. If it is true, it is a doorway and pathway to knowing him. If it is false, it is a barrier to such knowing, a path leading away from him.*

If I have the false idea that God's love for me will mean he answers my prayers the way I want him to, I won't see the much fuller picture of how he loves me. If I think God's love for me is performance-based, that will blunt my understanding of true love and shut down the abounding right away. If I think the way to show God's love to everyone is to never care about their sins, my knowledge of God's love is incomplete.

Our knowledge of God has direct bearing on our ability to love. Now if I want to get to know a person, I have to depend on what they share about themselves. I can't say I understand the real you unless you choose to open up and disclose something of your heart to me.

Since God is a personal, relational God, we need to think about knowing him the same way. We can only know him through what he has shared about himself. And that takes us straight to Jesus.

Colossians 1:19-20

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him...

Christ is the complete self-disclosure of God. That's where God opened up and said, "Here's who I am" to the world. So if we want to know what it means that God is love,

we should be able to discover that by looking to Jesus. He is the access point for everything we need to understand about God the Father.

Paul believed this so strongly that he wrote to the Corinthians and said,

1 Corinthians 2:2

For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

For him, it zeroed in even further to focus on Christ's death and resurrection. Later in the letter to the Philippians, Paul said,

Philippians 3:10

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings...

Here again, you may be thinking, "Tell me something I don't already know. Of course we need to know Jesus. Of course the cross is important." And maybe this message feels redundant. But being able to rattle off the basic events of Jesus' life doesn't mean we know all we need to know.

Recently the Oxford Dictionary was in the news because they had eliminated some words associated with Christianity from one of their newest compact dictionaries. Words like "sin" and "disciple" were dropped. The editors felt that changing times and a changing culture have outgrown certain Christian terms and they weren't needed anymore.

But lots of words related to the cross seem to have disappeared from conversation. At one time the church had whole list of vocabulary words they developed to help them wrap their minds around the full scope of what Jesus' death was all about. Words like propitiation. Justification. Atonement. Substitution. Redemption. Imputed Righteousness. Most of them have fallen into disuse and we rarely hear them let alone think about them.

I'm not saying we have to go memorize a bunch of old words to be good Christians. Vocabulary isn't the issue. But good thinking is. And regardless of the words we know or don't know, can stop and reflect on the messages we find on the cross about love and forgiveness.

And as we think about those messages, the knowledge takes a turn and becomes experiential. We encounter that forgiveness for ourselves, and that's what really releases the love. When Jesus was at Peter's house and the woman was crying at Jesus' feet, he told Peter this:

Luke 7:47

I tell you, her sins — and they are many — have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love.

I don't want to be the person who loves little. I want to be quick to go and confess as much of my sin to God, as often as I can, because that's when knowledge of God becomes a real, personal knowledge. And that's where love thrives best, because it comes from a heart that understands firsthand the wideness of God's love.

Paul says that knowledge results in something else that also makes this petri dish work:

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best

Seeing spiritual value

Have you ever watched The Antiques Roadshow? It's always surprising to hear which pieces are worth anything, because most of the time they are the ones that look like old junk. I remember years ago seeing a woman bring in a table she bought at a garage sale for \$25. She had no idea what it was worth, but the appraisers on the show recognized it instantly and went crazy, because and it was a rare card table worth half a million.

In this verse, when Paul talks about discerning what is best, the language in the Greek calls to mind the image of an appraiser – a person who can accurately determine what something is really worth . Paul wants us to be able to recognize the value of what's put in front of us.

This is an outgrowth of knowing Christ, because the more we know him, the more our way of seeing the world shift to his way of seeing it. And his way is much different than the rest of the world. He saw value in opportunities that we would view as inefficient or a waste of time. As author Charles Hummel puts it this way: "Jesus' life was never feverish; he had time for people. He could spend hours talking with one person, such as the Samaritan woman at the well."

When you begin to look at his life, you read story after story where his priorities were at odds with his disciples, where he wanted to stop and help someone and they didn't think there was time. He always knew not only when to stop and take the time, but also what each individual needed most.

Being able to see the spiritual value in things makes all kinds of room for love to abound. Because love operates on a different economy than the rest of the world. It takes incredible amounts of time. It cares more about people than getting tasks done.

Let me give you a very practical example. Some of you may have met my cousin Mandy. She's sung a few times with the worship team. She really enjoyed getting plugged in at New Day and felt like she had found a church home. But her mom's health is not great, and her knees give her a lot of trouble. And a few weeks ago, Mandy said, "I feel like God is telling me I need to go to church with my mom so I can help her get up and down, because sometimes she's in so much pain she needs to leave early."

The thing is, it's not particularly a church Mandy wants to attend at this time in her life. It's where she grew up, and it's a hard place for her to find a fit as an adult. But she was seeing what was best in the situation, and that was loving her mom well by being there for her.

The value we put on people, the value we put on time, the value we put on our own needs – all of those will determine how much room there is in the petri dish for love.

*And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best **and may be pure and blameless***

Living on pitch

My aunt used to play this piano solo called Little LuLu. It was supposed to be a recital piece, but something was very wrong. The story was that Little LuLu got to the piano and one key was missing. Every time she got to a note in her song that required that key, she just played the next key up. It was the most painful tune to listen to, because the note was played and over and over and it didn't fit with the melody.

When our life is inconsistent, it's clear to other people that something is wrong. It doesn't fit the melody of love. Paul says our lives should be pure and blameless.

The word translated as pure in this verse is referring to pure motives. Paul wants us to be able to love genuinely, without working an angle. He told the Roman church,

Romans 12:9

Love must be sincere.

If we are self-centered in the way we show love, it no longer reflects what we know about God. In contrast, sincere love with no hidden agenda is so rare and beautiful that it can't help but remind us of God. I think that's why love was the only characteristic Jesus said would be the distinguishing character of his followers.

Paul also wanted the Philippians to be blameless. I believe being blameless has to do with how you conduct yourself when you are wronged. Let's say your spouse does something really immature and spiteful. It was completely uncalled for and clearly wrong. You've been hurt and the wrong needs to be addressed.

But now a new challenge arises. Because you have to now think about what kind of response will you give. You can justify many things – saying something mean back, going into a rage, demanding an apology. Any of those would be understandable. The question is whether or not they would be blameless, and the answer is no. Having the right to do something doesn't make it the right thing to do.

Paul calls us to the high road of love – the turning the other cheek path that is so rarely seen. This is Calvary style love at its best – refusing to call down angels from heaven and staying on the cross. Bearing the suffering for the sake of the other person, even when they don't want it.

Talk about an environment for love to flourish. The combination of having sincerity and blamelessness working together is powerful testimony to the heart of the gospel. And Paul says we should consistently live that out for the foreseeable future.

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ,

Looking for Jesus

It's almost a throwaway line on there. Paul doesn't develop the thought any further, but I wanted to leave you with it, because I think this too is part of what nourishes love. I've said it before, but if you were to read through the New Testament, you would find that almost every single book makes references to Christ's return. That idea so permeated the early church that it had them living with a constant sense of expectation.

With the passage of time, that anticipation has evaporated. Technically, the reverse should be true. We're about 2000 years closer to Jesus coming back than the first disciples were. It could just as easily be in our generation as it could have been in theirs. How would life change if we thought Jesus might come back at any time?

I think one thing is for certain: We'd pay more attention to how we love one another. Less important differences and arguments would fade into the background, because the main priority would be readiness. We would be more aware of our actions and more conscious of our choices.

Jesus told his disciples to wait and watch, because no one knows the hour of his return. Do we believe that's still true? The more we embrace that, the greater our incentive will be to love each other well until he comes back.

We have the opportunity this morning to come to the Lord's Supper together, to think again about his great love for us. And if we're willing to bring as many of our sins to him as we can and confess them, we can know that love in an even deeper way. Let's be forgiven much so we will love much.