

“The Fellowship of Kindred Minds”
Philippians 1:1-11

October 13, 2002
Dr. J. Howard Olds

A cartoon, in a Saturday Evening Review, features a young boy sitting under a tree taking inventory of his relationships. “So far, I have 14 people who love me, 22 people who like me, six people who tolerate me, and I have only three enemies. I’d say that’s not bad for a little kid.”

When it comes to relationships, how are you doing? We are made for community; we will never be satisfied to be self-reliant. We need one another. The friendships in the fellowship of the first century Church were so focused and spiritually formative they coined a word for it. They called it *koinonia* – the fellowship of kindred minds working together, sharing the loads of life while reaching out to others. Let us take a look today at the fellowship of Christians at Philippi, Paul’s first established church on European soil.

IN THE FELLOWSHIP, WE FEEL BLESSED. Verse 3 *“I thank my God every time I remember you.”*

When the Apostle Paul counted his blessings, he did not name the degrees he had earned, assets he had accumulated, the places he had traveled, churches he had built nor the people he knew. He had it. He just didn’t need to flaunt it. This soldier of the cross was a Hebrew of Hebrews, a zealous and faultless Pharisee, educated in the exclusive school of Gamaliel. He had personally sailed to every known port in the Middle East building a church in every place. Instead of mentioning all of that, Paul says simply, *“I thank my God every time I remember you.”*

The foundation of all fellowship is gratitude. When our hearts and minds are touched by the goodness and mercy of God, we are ready to connect with a community of people. From the first day until now, Paul had been engaged in a partnership for which he was deeply grateful. So he opens this letter with a prayer of thanks. Meister Eckhart said, “If the only prayer you ever say in your life is ‘thank you’, it would be sufficient.”

We are not self-made persons, whatever the nature of our success. We did not ask to be born. We do not produce the air we breathe; we have not earned a right to life. We are blessed, you and I, by the gift of life and the gift of people. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “We did not find our friends; the good Lord gave them to us.” A loyal friend laughs at your jokes when they are not so good and sympathizes with your problems when they are not so bad. Where would any of us be without the fellowship of others who have helped us along the road of life?

Among our greatest blessings are people who saw in our sorry lives gold worth refining. People who gave us tools to start digging for that which makes life worth living. They have names; there was Porter whose favorite saying was “keep looking up,” and Annie Laurie, who in one of my early churches, thought I was worth trying to help. Every Sunday she would make a list on the bulletin of all the grammatical errors I made in my sermon and give them to me on her way out of church. There was a little church who just would not let me quit when I wanted to give up, having grown weary in well-doing. They kept me in the pulpit. You have names for those people. Even now, you can remember their words. In fellowship we are blessed with people who share the journey of faith. *“I thank my God every time I remember you.”*

IN THE FELLOWSHIP, WE STICK TOGETHER.

Verse 7, translated by Eugene Petersen says, *“My prayers and hopes have deep roots in reality. You have, after all, stuck with me all the way.”* Paul then goes on to list the places he has been, the prisons in which he has lived, the struggles of his life.

Last July up in Quecreek, Pennsylvania, nine miners were trapped for three days 240 feet underground in a water-filled mine shaft. As miner Hayhugh spoke to CNN when rescued, he said, “Early on we decided we were going to stick together no matter what. We decided to live or die as a group.” Fifty-five degree water threatened to kill them slowly by hypothermia. But these men developed a plan. When one got cold, the other eight would huddle around him until he got warm again. They shared what little food and light they had until they were pulled to safety. When you are in the pit, stick together. That is the story they came forth to share with the world.

There is an old Native American proverb which goes “one stick is easily broken, but ten sticks tied together have a strength of their own.” We are stronger together than we can ever be alone.

- When your husband comes home, says he’s gay and leaving the family – you need somebody to lean on.
- When your wife walks out saying she just doesn’t love you any more – you need somebody to lean on.
- When your single daughter gets pregnant, again, and you wonder how things went so wrong – you need somebody to lean on.
- When you have lost your job and you have nobody to blame but yourself – you need somebody to lean on.
- When you took a bad business gamble that has left you broke – you need somebody to lean on.
- When you would rather stay high on drugs than face reality – you need somebody to lean on.

I want to build a church that does not shoot its wounded. I want to build a church where sinners are welcomed. I want to build a church that can carry heavy loads. I want to build a church where everybody has somebody to lean on.

IN THE FELLOWSHIP, WE LOVE WISELY.

Verse 9 *“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.”*

I pray that you will learn to love wisely. You see, love is a many splintered thing.

There are some things love is not. Love is not ENMESHMENT. When the blind lead the blind both fall into the ditch, says the Bible. Somebody needs to see the way out. You don't love people by becoming enmeshed in their problems. Love is not SUPERFICIAL SWEETNESS. When somebody loves everybody and has an answer to everything, duck. They are so self-deceived they are dangerous. Love is not MANIPULATION. Love does not exploit, control, nor have to know. Love is content to sow the seeds of kindness. Love is not GRANDIOSITY. You are not Jesus; you are just one of the boys trying to get in a good word, whenever a good word is appropriate. You don't have to take the world's problems on your shoulders, just share the load with those around you.

Love does make the world go round. Without it we die, even though we go on in endless motion and activity. Tuesdays with Morrie is a tender story about Mitch Albom, a sports writer who catches up with Morrie Schwartz, a former professor dying of ALS. The two meet on Tuesdays to talk about life and death, friendship and faith. Morrie, near death, says to Mitch, “When we are infants, we need people to survive. When we are dying we need people to survive. But here is the secret. In between, we need people even more. Do you believe that, Mitch?”

Mitch replies, “The world I live in doesn't allow for the contemplation of spiritual things.” “You hate the word **spiritual**, don't you Mitch?” asks Morrie. “You think it's just touchy-feely stuff.” “I just don't understand we must love one another or die,” says Mitch. “It's a very simple lesson. Very simple,” concludes Morrie. In the fellowship, we learn to love and be loved while we are still living.

IN THE FELLOWSHIP, WE LIVE BLAMELESS.

Verse 10 *“So I pray all of this to help you determine what is best so that on the day of Christ, you may be pure and blameless.”*

I don't know about you, but I live a much better life in community. If I lived a life in isolation, I would not be as good a person as I try to be now. Sometimes, face to face with temptation, I come to the realization that the sins of the fathers affect the lives of their children to the third and fourth generation. No one of us in this room lives alone; no one of us in this room sins alone. Every time we miss the mark, we take some other people with us. We ought to remember that the next time we miss what God is calling us to be in our lives. In the fellowship, we are strengthened to live victorious lives because we live not only to ourselves but are accountable to others who have been around us and learn from us. Archibald

Hart said, "Accountability to another is the only way to safeguard against poor judgment, unconscious motivations, and self-deception."

The muscle of the early Methodist Movement was the Class Meeting. All card carrying Methodists met once a week with a group of twelve, or so, to give an account of their discipleship. In this fellowship, the leader asked, "Is it well with your soul? Have you done any harm? Have you done any good? Have you observed the means of grace? Have you kept the ordinances of God this week through worship, sacrament, prayer, and Bible study? Have you engaged in acts of mercy for the larger community?" Every Methodist was asked to answer every week to the class leader about their faithfulness in their discipleship. And we wonder why the Methodists stormed the world 200 years ago? Take a look at that kind of accountability group and you begin to understand the genius of the Methodist movement in England and the early days of this country. You see, there is something about this accountability. The missing link in most of our spiritual lives is the fact that we don't answer to any one else. It's time once more for the Methodists to watch over one another in love, not in judgment. We need to become accountable to one another.

IN THE FELLOWSHIP, WE BEAR FRUIT.

Verse 11 *"Be filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ."*

Consider the fruits of righteousness. The statistics are there. Church people give more to charity than non-church people. Church people are twice as likely to volunteer in the community as non-church people. Church people are less likely to die of heart disease than non-church people. Such is the fruit of right living.

Consider further the fruits of receptivity or hospitality. We need to make sure our doors are open and our little groups are welcoming. Have we, deep in our hearts, a passion for those who have not found the fellowship of faith? The difference between a church and a clique is an open door. I am going to ask every group in this church to do something for me. Whatever group you are in, whatever the age of the Sunday school class, the youth groups, whatever the size of your Bible study group - Will you place an empty chair in your room in a prominent place as a constant reminder that others need to be invited to your fellowship? I do not care how long you have been together, how crowded your room may be, will you keep the door open, the welcome extended? Bear fruit. In the fellowship we bear fruits by extending the spirit of hospitality.

Making your way in the world today takes everything you've got.

Taking a break from all your worries sure would help a lot.

Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name.

Sometimes you want to be where they are always glad you came.

In the popular TV series, *Cheers*, that fellowship was found at a bar. I propose our needs for fellowship can be better met in the community life of the Church to the glory and praise of God. Will you help it happen?

