

“Dear St. Paul’s”
January 3, 2021
St. Paul’s UCC Church
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

Philippians 1:2-11

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

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, 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 by the day of Jesus Christ.

It 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. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to 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.

Dear St. Paul’s,

I have one goal for this sermon: I will not cry.

I *have* cried. I imagine I will cry again. I have a lot of feelings these days.

But I don’t believe that blubbering is the best use of this moment. So I am going to reach for a little structure this morning; I am going to rely on a rhetorical device to keep the water-works at bay.

St. Paul’s Church, I have written you a letter.

This is *not* an original idea. It goes all the way back to, well, St. Paul himself. Our namesake did much of thinking and theologizing in the letters he wrote to his churches back 2000 years ago. In that tradition—and, also, in the hopes of keeping my tears to a minimum—I would like to share my letter with you.

Here we go.

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ!

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you. And, oh St. Paul's, how I do thank God for you! I thank God for all the ways you have helped form me as a pastor.

Now it's true, serving as your minister was not my first rodeo. When I first came here back in 2011, I'd been around the block a couple of times – I'd been an associate pastor at a church in Des Moines and I had been a hospice chaplain – but when I look back at the time we have spent together, when I remember the person that I used to be, I can see that I have grown. So much. And I don't think that's because of me. I think that's because of you. You have nurtured me into a deeper understanding of my own calling; you have helped me grow more comfortable in my own skin.

But St. Paul's, that's who you are. That's what you do. You welcome.

Church, I thank God for you, as the Apostle Paul puts it, *because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now*. From the first day, St. Paul's, you have shown me the gospel, which I believe boils down to something else Paul says in another letter, "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God!" (Romans 15:7). I realize it might have been strange to call a young Southern woman with a baby who didn't live in Madrid, who – perhaps strangest of all – was a Presbyterian (!!) to be your pastor, but you did just that. And despite some of our superficial differences, you welcomed me with a warmth that only could have been born from God above.

And the welcome that you've embodied – that's not just for me. I've seen you welcome new folks into the folds of this church over and over again. Young people. Retired people. Single people. Married people. Children. Youth. You have shown the love of God, the warmth of God, the welcome of God to us – to so many of us – again and again and again. Thank you.

It 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... so writes the Apostle. And I feel this, too, Church. It's true that we all share in God's grace, and that we do it together. One of the ways we've done this is by trusting in God's grace to reach beyond our comfort zones, and to try new ministries together.

Some churches rarely – if ever – venture into new things, you know. Some churches are too afraid. But not us! And, even if we have been afraid from time to time, that has never stopped us from trying. We have arrived at some of our new and most out-of-the-box ideas through our annual Visioning Retreats (for example, our community's Madrid Kids' Summer Lunch Program and the Financial Peace University course), while some of our "new things" have come about during other times of the year (for example, our Blue Christmas service and our regular youth-led worship services). But no matter how they've come about, we have continued to trust the Holy Spirit to lead us, even if that means being led to uncharted territory.

And what about this COVID pandemic? Wow, it has been hard. But that hasn't stopped us either; to the contrary, the global pandemic has kept us innovative and open-minded. Look at all the new things we have done together! Since March, we have learned how to worship online through Facebook Live. We have even learned how to use Facebook for our prayer concerns. And last week, we ventured every further out, and held a Zoom worship service as Maddie, Vandon and Elizabeth joined the church!

I'm so grateful for all the ways we have stretched beyond "the way things had always been done" and tried some new things, some new ministries, together.

For God is my witness, the Apostle writes, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And how true this is for me, too! I feel such compassion, such love, for you as a whole church; but I also love you as individuals. I am not going to name all of the folks I'm grateful for, because that means I would name pretty much every single person in our church, both members and friends of the church. And that would be a lot of people. And we'd be here forever. (Also: I might cry). So I'll just say now that I love all of you. I have loved your stories (some of you can make me laugh until my sides feel like they are going to burst). I have loved listening to your hopes, your dreams. I have loved visiting you and your families in the hospital. I have loved the privilege of walking with you in your joys and in your sorrows. *For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.*

And finally, St. Paul's, *I 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.* God is not finished with you, Church. Not even close. God was present with you before I came, God has been present with you while I was here, and God will continue to be present with you, right in the midst of you, long after I am gone. *I might be leaving you, but God isn't going anywhere. God never has, and never will.*

I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion.... I have a lot of feelings today. And one of them is excitement. I am excited to watch you grow. I am eager to see what God has got in store for you. And I promise you this: I will be rooting and pulling and praying for you. God has got a hold of you. And God will not let you go.

St. Paul's Church, thank you for all that you have invested in me. Thank you for all that we have done together. Thank you for loving me so well, and for letting me love you.

And, most of all, thanks be to God for leading us to each other, and to never leaving us alone.