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 First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
 Sixth Sunday After Easter, May 22, 2022
 Text: Philippians 1:1-11

Dear Church

Introduction to Scripture

The last few Sundays we have heard stories *about* Paul, the great leader of the early church, from the book of Acts. Today we will hear the first part of a letter written *by* Paul. It's addressed to the congregation he established in Philippi, a leading city and Roman colony in the province of Macedonia. Paul probably visited the congregation once or twice after having founded it and maintained an especially warm relationship with them. At the time of his writing, he was imprisoned. In spite of this, his letter is permeated with joy. Listen for God's word: *Philippians 1:1-11*. This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God!

Letter

Dear Church,

I am writing you a letter since it somehow seems easier than preaching a sermon today, not that either is ever easy when mere words seem such a fragile vessel to carry the weight of thoughts and emotions and gospel.

Plus, I have models. Over a third of the New Testament is comprised of letters. I am taking my inspiration from the one we just heard. But don't get me wrong—the Apostle Paul, I am not. He was a fearless, towering figure who shaped—and some even say founded—the Christian church, who pivoted from persecutor to proselytizer, who endured shipwreck, prison, and a thorn in the side for the sake of Christ and made tents to make ends meet. I, on the other hand, am a well-fed associate pastor with a housing allowance who my whole career has constantly said to God, “Who, me?” Nevertheless, Paul and I--and not incidentally all of you--share the title “servant of Christ Jesus.” Paul and I also share two things which are evident in the Philippians text I just read.

The first is gratitude. “I thank my God every time I remember you.” Paul's “you” is the Philippian congregation. My “you” is the First Presbyterian Church of Athens. But, as this is the occasion of my last Sunday before retirement, I can't help but remember as well the other five congregations to which I have been intimately connected as baptized member, seminary intern, associate pastor, and pastor.¹ I am thankful to have served alongside of hundreds of remarkable Presbyterians. While the black robes make me and Ryan stand out, let me assure you that we are not in this church boat alone. We are in this together with you. It's not an enterprise any of us could do alone. Ministry is truly a partnership.

I recall a children's sermon I once did. My aim was to illustrate how in the church we all need each other and must work together. No one by themselves can accomplish the hard things God calls us to do. I lay down on the brick floor. Then I asked the bevy of preschoolers to squat down all around me. One by one, I asked each to try to lift me up. None could do it. Next, I asked them all to work together. On the count of three they raised me a good two feet off the floor. After a moment of amazement, I told them they could put me down. I neglected to use the word "gently."

Paul is thankful for the Philippians' sharing in the gospel from the first day. He is grateful for their partnership. When I think about all the ways you have participated in sharing Good News with Athens and the world, I am humbled. You bring grocery sacks of cereal and soup every month for the food bank. You drive the van and spend the night with Family Promise so homeless families can get back on their feet. You serve on boards, work in institutions, and volunteer in countless ways in our community. As a congregation and as individuals, you are leaven in the lump and salt in the dish, together spreading the grace of God. Every morning when I wake up, I pinch myself to see if I'm dreaming. I am in awe that I get paid (at least until the end of this month) to work alongside of such dedicated, talented, faithful people.

And speaking of getting paid, I am grateful especially for your generous offerings which have allowed me and the rest of our staff to devote ourselves to supporting your ministry, your participation in the gospel. I'm also grateful for the Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church which for 300 years has cared for Presbyterian ministers and their families. Thanks to divine providence, and perhaps our Scottish heritage famous for saving a penny and investing it well, our church's retirement plan is more than fully funded. You should be proud.

I was ordained on a blue-sky October Sunday afternoon at the First Presbyterian Church of St. Joseph, Missouri. They pulled out all the stops: brass and tympany, arrangements of red roses, and a reception in the Fellowship Hall which was as fine as what you do here. I'll never forget kneeling in the sanctuary and feeling the hands pressing on my head and shoulders--at once a holy weight of responsibility and a holy connection of support from the communion of saints who surrounded me. The year was 1983. That's 39 years ago. Add in the year I served as a fulltime seminary intern and you get the nice round biblical number of 40. And in Bible-speak, 40 is a long time: 40 days and nights of the Great Flood, 40 years wandering in the Wilderness, 40 days of fasting in the desert. I think back on that 26 year old, green as a gourd, and marvel at the way that God, from then until now, has taken my measly fish and loaves, my faltering presence and shaky faith, and done something good. After the presbytery meeting last Saturday when my call was officially dissolved, together with our elders and a few others Robyn McDonald rounded up, I stood under another blue sky and scattered the dried rose petals from a long time ago.

Each call has been unique. Each congregation is unique. Invariably I have watched newcomers to town church shop, vainly seeking a church just like the one they loved and left behind. But they never find it, for each church has its own personality, its own history, its own gifts. I feel particularly fortunate to have been called to wonderful congregations—all different

but wonderfully faithful in their own time and place. And y'all here at FPC (or "all y'all" as Bob Googe called you in his charge at my installation)—y'all have been an absolute joy!

Each pastor is also unique. Successor pastors never fill the shoes of their predecessors. They always bring their own. As you accepted and encouraged me when I arrived seven years ago, I have no doubt you will do the same for whoever God through you calls next. In our Presbyterian way of being the church, as Ryan is wont to say, when pastors depart, they really have to depart. It's not fair to the next person to keep the old pastoral connections connected. So as much as I might like to, I won't be praying at your funeral. Even if I did, how would you know?

So, in addition to being grateful like St. Paul, I also share his prayer. His prayer for the Philippian congregation is my prayer for you: "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."

Paul prays a mouthful there. I'll keep it simple. My prayer for you is that your love may overflow more and more. Love is, after all, what it's all about. And I don't mean sentimental fluff love. I mean love with starch and muscle. Love that shows itself in kindness and compassion and justice. Love that is, as Paul says elsewhere, patient, not envious, nor insisting on its own way. You are a diverse congregation. You have different views on every hot button topic. You have different income levels. You aren't as racially and ethnically diverse as I suspect you will become, but you aren't totally homogenous. And there are even some Yellow Jackets and Tigers and Tarheels amid you Dawgs. My prayer is that you will speak the truth in love to one another, that you will care for one another through thick and thin, that you will practice mutual forbearance, even when it would be so much easier to let the other have it and stomp off. You may not be unanimous, but you need to be unified because the one God we know in Jesus Christ is working in you.

May overflowing love be the touchstone of all your relationships, not just within the church but everywhere. No one ever said on their deathbed, I wish I had spent more hours at the office. Don't regret that you didn't tend the relationships God has given you. To quote a friend of mine, "It's all about relationships. Everything else is just a footnote."

In another letter Paul uses a metaphor for exercising love. Wear it, he says. "Above all," he tells the Colossian church, "clothe yourselves with love." Max Beerbohm wrote a little fairy tale about love published in 1897. It's called "The Happy Hypocrite." Given our recent experience with wearing surgical masks during the pandemic, Beerbohm's tale is especially poignant. In the story, a worldly and wicked man named Lord George wished to woo and win a saintly girl he fell for. In order to do this, he donned the mask of a saint. Of course, he had to act the part of a saint to be convincing. The girl returned his love, and they married. Later, when a jilted ex-girlfriend discovered the ruse, she challenged Lord George to take off his mask

in front of his beloved and show his face for the sorry thing it was. He did what he was told, only to discover that underneath the saint's mask, his face had become the face of a saint.

Paul began his letter, as was the first century custom, with the signature and address at the top. “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi.” You are saints, God’s holy people in Athens. And as Timothy was Paul’s faithful companion, Jack has been mine. At every step in my ministry, he has been supportive. You know about his running the sanctuary AV systems, his engineering giant mobiles in the Fellowship Hall, singing with the Mellows, working with Habitat, doing Stephen Ministry, and more. You don’t know that he was *the* IT department in Abbeville for not just our church but all the nearby pastors, or that I cannot begin to count number of back massages he has given me, or that one year he even taught Middle school Sunday school because I couldn’t find anyone else. He has been an excellent partner in ministry.

So, I close with a thankful heart—grateful for your sharing in the gospel—and with a prayer that your love, dear church, may overflow more and more.

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

ⁱ First Presbyterian, Greensboro, NC (my home church); Warner Memorial Presbyterian, Kensington, MD (my internship church); First Presbyterian, St. Joseph, MO (my first call); Mount Vernon Presbyterian, Sandy Springs, GA (my longest call); and Abbeville Presbyterian, Abbeville, SC (my only solo pastorate).