

The One Who Began a Good Work Among You
Philippians 1: 1-18a
Jon Frost

Yogi Berra was the iconic Hall of Fame catcher for the New York Yankees through the 40s, 50s, and 60s. His on field accomplishments are legendary. However, he is also one player who might be equally remembered for some of his off the field accomplishments; in his case his extensive collection of quizzical sayings, or Yogisms. For example, when giving directions to a friend he once said, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." Commenting on a restaurant in town he quipped, "Nobody goes there anymore. It's too crowded."

I had perhaps the most famous Yogism on my mind this week as we continue our series through the letter to the Philippians. During the 1961 season in a game where teammates Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris hit back to back home runs, Berra remarked, "It's deja vu all over again." And it is deja vu all over again because nearly a year ago we began a series on the letter to the Colossians in which I also preached on the opening section.

Like that letter, this opening section of Philippians contains what you'd expect; Identifying who's writing, the recipients, outlining some of the broad themes to come later in the letter. And again, we enter the body of the letter through the doorways of grace and peace, this quintessential Christian greeting so loved by Paul and used in every letter attributed to him. Grace; the favor of God upon you as God's gift and peace; the movement towards the renewal of all things, which is also God's gift. I am perpetually fascinated by this greeting and call attention to it once more only to highlight how fundamental and formative this greeting was and is to the Christian community then and now.

The section containing verses 3-11 is a testament to the level of affection between Paul and the Philippian church. In it Paul effuses joy, gratitude, confidence, affection, and longing. There is definitely a special connection, a mutual trust here, that we simply don't see to this extent in the other New Testament letters. I'm sure Paul would say he loves all of the communities in which he served, but let's be real: If Paul were a school teacher, he could without hesitation say the Philippians were his favorite class.

The Philippians were not just recipients of Paul's message. As Paul says, they shared in the gospel from the first day until the present. They shared in God's grace with Paul, through his imprisonment and in his proclamation of the gospel. This clicked for me in a big way when encountering the following quote from Tom Wright's commentary on this passage. He writes, "The fact that people from a different country would raise money, and send one of their number on the dangerous journey to carry it to an imprisoned friend, speaks volumes for the esteem and love in which they held [Paul]."

This is the language of cross-cultural mission partnership and ooh this brought up all the feels for me. One of the joys of my call to serve this congregation is to help lead and facilitate our international mission partnerships. As you can imagine, the global Covid 19 pandemic has introduced tremendous challenges to this work. I have been on Zoom calls with mission partners in Honduras where the majority of participants are in tears as we grasped the reality that we have no idea when traveling to visit our dear friends and work alongside together will be possible. I have listened to the stress and anxiety concerning how this pandemic is affecting a country where 2/3rds of the population already live below the poverty line.

But, since we share in the gospel together, as businesses were shutting down I have watched the Church get to work. (A short video of Honduran folks giving out food supplies was shown.) One Presbyterian church in Honduras began counting; how many families could we supply with enough food to get by? How many people would it take to organize supplies? What resources would we need? Using grants from within the PCUSA, support from US presbyteries, as well as their own resources, this handful of volunteers has now made three separate distribution runs, providing critical food supplies to between 750-1000 families each time, covering over 150 miles of ground. On a call this past Thursday our good friend Alex Rodas described it as like watching the story of Jesus feeding the multitudes right before his eyes.

This is the Church at its best - reaching out and working together out of recognition of our mutuality, interdependence, and sharing of resources because we share in God's grace and the gospel together.

Just as God's grace is a gift to each individual, Paul recognizes that the life and partnership we share together is also God's gift. Even as tempting as it would be for Paul to take credit for the growth in the Philippian church and the way they received his message, he makes the important distinction that it is ultimately God at work in their lives. Though it pains him to be distant from them he is confident that God, who began a good work among them will bring it to completion. There is a sense of letting go in his words, a recognition that he has played his part.

This is the tender reality the Church faces whenever new generations rise up within the body of Christ. Last night pastors, staff, recent high school graduates and their families gathered over Zoom for a Baccalaureate service. It was a rich time of thanksgiving and



sending. The graduates on the call are young women and men who have shared in the gospel in this place. They have led in worship, served as deacons, served on mission trips, experienced their faith grow on retreats and in Bible studies, and played with our children in the nursery.

At the end of the service, each staff member shared a one sentence charge from Scripture and I was drawn to this from verse 9. "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight." There is a particular application to the experience many of them will have. As they study, learn, and train for their careers my prayer is that the knowledge and wisdom they gain would not supplant or quiet their love that was hopefully formed in the Church; but rather that the knowledge and wisdom they gain would enter their minds but then be an outpouring of their hearts as embodied love for the sake of the world in whatever vocation they end up in.

As Paul writes the letter to the Philippians, he is in prison. And apparently there are people outside the prison walls proclaiming Christ out of selfish motives. But again, Paul is more keenly tuned in to how God is working behind the scenes. He is confident his imprisonment has actually helped spread the gospel. And selfish motives or not, Paul rejoices that Christ is being proclaimed.

Like countless stories before his own, Paul is confident that what sometimes is intended for evil, God uses for good. We cannot presume to know perfectly all of the “whys” of a cultural moment. But we can know this: we are at all times and in every moment called to share in the gospel together. Our resources, our gifts, our suffering, our power. We can also know this; that the One who began the work in us will bring it to completion. Amen.

Resources

Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters by Tom Wright

<https://yogiberramuseum.org/about-yogi/yogisms/>