

Sermon Text for May 2, 2021

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Genesis 48:8-12, Philippians 4:21-23

“A final greeting”

It is hard to believe that we find ourselves finished with Philippians. We began on January 10 at a time that as a congregation we really needed it. We called this study, this time together, surprised by joy. We established that we found ourselves, and I would argue that we still find ourselves in a very unique time in the history of this church where difficulty is coming from the outside which forces us here in this family to act and react in ways that we are not used to. We looked at the commonalities that we find between Paul and our situation, Paul in the midst of the most difficult time in his life, in prison, separated from those whom he loves and completely not in control of his life.

We looked at commonalities that we found within the church in Philippi and our own. This was a church that was loved and faithful and yet found itself in a society and a culture that was hostile to it and their very lives were demanded of them every time they stepped out of the door. Not quite the situation in which we find ourselves, but we do find ourselves in a time of unprecedented anxiety and difficulty as we together face this pandemic, as together we look to gather again once the danger has passed.

We raised up this life giving approach by Paul that even in the midst of the most difficult time of his life he was still able to consistently remark upon the joy that was at the center of his life, this joy that found its beginning and its end in Jesus. A joy that defined him because he refused to be defined by his current environment or by what those in his society and culture attempted to define him by. No matter what we are facing now, we established, God has seen it before. There is a joy and a consolation in knowing that we are not in this alone and that we can do all things in Christ who strengthens us as long as we learn how to be content in all times of our life. As long as we learn to discover the joy that at times surprised us even in the deepest and darkest times of our lives.

Paul ends his letter today to the Philippians exactly in the way that he began it. He appeal today to a grace found in Jesus that gives our spirit peace. Again, a commonality. Our quest over this period of time has been one of peace and security. The same is true for Paul and the church in Philippi. His final words to us today are more than just a farewell, they are a

greeting that we would do well not to overlook. It is this greeting, and greetings like these, that kept the community intact and continuing to love each other. Let's read.

READ

There are so many different ways to greet each other depending on where you find yourself and in what part of the world you may find yourself. Here we find ourselves in a culture that is fairly puritanical and so when we greet each other we might shake hands, you know I'm a hugger, so we might even hug. We use different words to greet each other, in Italy you use the same word for hello and goodbye, just so that no one gets confused. So you can say Ciao, when you see someone for the first time, or you can say ciao when they are getting ready to leave as a greeting to say goodbye.

In Romans 16 you see a long list of greetings as Paul tells those in Rome to greet Prisca and Aquila who are co-workers with him. He tells people to greet Epaenetus and Mary and Andornicus and Junia who were apostles. He continues and tells them to greet Ampliatus and Urbanus and Stachys, he goes on with an entire list of people to greet and then he ends with: Greet one another with a holy kiss.

So when we are talking about a final greeting today, we have to include the holy kiss. See, I know, some of you have already disappeared into eroticism, but that has nothing to do with this phrase. Greeting each other with a holy kiss is something that most of the Mediterranean world does to this day. When I go to Italy when I see people that I know, male or female, I greet them with a kiss and not just because the Bible tells me to, but because that is the culture of the area. It is not strange. It is like a handshake. Once Covid is over maybe we should start that up, the friendliest church in the county where everyone gets kissed whether they like it or not.

But a greeting is important and crucial whether it be a handshake or a kiss because it tells a story. Our first OT story we find is when Jacob, also known as Israel, sees his grandsons for the first and last time. It is not only a first greeting, but also a final greeting. He doesn't see well, remember his dad, Isaac, who didn't see well and he took advantage of it to steal his blessing, well here Jacob doesn't see well and he says who are these kids in front of me? He hasn't seen Joseph his son for decades and Joseph says they are my kids.

He asks that they would be brought to him and he vs.10 kissed them and embraced them. This final greeting was full of emotion and it told the story that these children are more than important to me, they are my pride and joy. I never imagined I would see you, Joseph, and now get to see your kids as well? I want to bless them. This final greeting between Joseph and his

father and Joseph's children served the purpose of consolidating God's power in his life and the life of his family.

Joseph, the second in command of the most powerful nation on the earth, Egypt, bows down to this foreign shepherd refugee as a final farewell and sign of respect. There was a necessity behind the embrace, the kiss, the greeting, the blessing. You know what I miss most, well at least one of the things that I miss the most when we are together in a normal way? The chaos that ensues during the passing of the peace. I can't keep some of you in your pews if I tried. You are running around the sanctuary hugging each other embracing, laughing, smiling, doing what a family does. These final greetings that we are seeing in Scripture today reflect the power that greetings have to hold families, to hold churches, together.

Our last verses in Philippians is a typical greeting for Paul, he ends all of his letters with a greeting, similar to the one that we read in Romans, but not all that long or involved. His greeting here is threefold. In vs.21 he gives a command to greet all Christians in the name of Jesus. That is what binds us together, that is why we are united. Today we are able to celebrate both of the sacraments that bind us together as a Christian family, the sacraments of communion and baptism. It is a way that we can greet each other as a community, but also our Savior.

Secondly in vs. 21 he says that all those who are his colleagues, working side by side with him, they greet those in Philippi as well. His associates who are with him in Rome, those who are near and far, greet him. As Presbyterians we call ourselves a connectional church. We are not an independent church in the sense that we are out there on our own. We have a Presbytery which is a gathering of local churches called Donegal Presbytery and they represent the counties of Lancaster, York, and Chester. We work together to spread the Gospel.

Finally in vs.22 he says the locals, those in the emperor's household, greet you as well, beloved church of Philippi. As we continue to find ourselves in this pandemic you should not be surprised as you see people streaming our services from all over the world. I know that there are people in Russia watching us now. I know that there are people in Ghana, and Madagascar, and Kenya, and Botswana, and Nigeria, and Malawi, Italy and other European countries and from all over the United States as well. Those from the emperor's household greet you church of Philippi. Oh church in Strasburg, those from all over the world greet you, literally all over the world.

Greetings allow those absent and those present to be involved together in the mission and the ministry of the church. What a time we have had together over this past year. We have been encouraged lately to allow ourselves to rediscover the primacy of joy in our faith and in our

relationships with each other. It is up to us to work hard to rediscover in our greetings with each other as they help define our common life together. Amen.