

SHARING LIFE AT FIRST ON SEPTEMBER 24, 2017 BY PASTOR BOB BENDER
“A CHURCH APPRECIATION MESSAGE” FROM PHILIPPIANS 1:3-8

Have you ever been in jail? I have a confession to make. Your pastor has. It was about this time of year in 1986 in Austin, TX—a day I will never forget. It was my day off. I was taking a nap in our bedroom when I was awakened with a uniformed police officer at the foot of my bed reading me my rights. It is humiliating to be handcuffed and led out of your house in front of your neighbors into a waiting police car. As we were headed down I-35 toward the downtown police station, the squad car took a right turn into the mall near our church. Well, as it turned out, it was a gag. It was one of those “pay to put someone in jail” deals. I was never so happy in my life to be handed a phone from a make-shift jail in the mall to raise \$1000 in donations for a nonprofit! Several church members had done this to me. They didn’t do this on their dime while I was working down at the church; they had to do this to me on my day off! Anyway, we all had a good laugh about it. I considered it one of the hazards of my profession and remember the event with fondness. I so appreciate our time in Austin at Windsor Park Baptist Church for nine years—the longest any pastor had stayed there. We got to minister to some 70 UT students; 33 of them surrendering to Christian ministry with one currently serving as a US Senator. No greater church could have walked through Beverly’s cancer journey with us in a more God-honoring and faith-filled way. Sometime after I left, they sold out and moved into the suburbs. I had a dream one night that they had bulldozed the auditorium and was so sad that I woke up with tears in my eyes! How I loved those folks.

Then we were called to the FBC Ada (OK)—a County seat town of 20,000—where I had the privilege of being the longest tenured of any pastor since WWII. They just needed somebody to stay there and love on them and they on us as they put up with me for 13 ½ years. How I remember with fondness the relationships we formed there that we re-engaged them in our recent trip to Oklahoma earlier this month. There, God allowed us to see some significant community leaders come to faith in Jesus because when you walk down the aisle of FBC Ada, it’s all over town the next day! We have memories of deacons poking holes in my baptismal waders and raising our kids together in the perfect slice of Americana—just like out of a Frank Capra movie! It was indeed a wonderful life.

Then 14 years ago this month, God called us and we responded kind of reluctantly to FBC Black Forest. It was a difficult adjustment as empty nesters without our close fam nearby. Two months after we moved here, dad got deathly sick and I thought, “what have I done?” But I was able to be there in Texas when needed and then God gave me a promise after we had been here a year (read Jeremiah 31:17). God honored that promise and moved our 3 children and 11 grandchildren and Beverly’s parents to us! God affirmed and confirmed His will—which by the way, is always good, acceptable, and perfect—with a wonderful pastor/church love affair that has produced many spiritual children. What God has done here with our little happy church in the forest is truly miraculous.

You see, I love the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. I have loved every church I have been a member of. Everything I am and have is because of the generosity of God’s people. No; they haven’t been perfect, but I haven’t been either, and by the way, neither have you.

I do have one regret however at each of our last two churches as senior pastor—I didn’t let them know while there how much I loved and appreciated them. I don’t want to make that same mistake here with you dear folks. So today I want to share a church appreciation message. October is Pastor Appreciation Month wherein many of you share your appreciation of your pastors. I have here a treasure trove of cards and letters that some of you have shared with me through the years. I keep every card, by the way. These are only representative of the many more I have in my office at home—love letters, really.

It has been ten years since his visit to Philippi, yet Paul, while in prison, remembers with fondness and great joy his pastorate there. One word summarizes his relationship to those Philippian believers, which is the focus of our text this morning. It is one of the more common Greek words still in use today; yet is one of the least practiced. It is one of the characteristics of a growing church and one of the things visitors are looking for in a church home.

The concept I am referring to is of course, *koinonia*, or fellowship. This word, *koinonia*, means to share together or participate in a common faith or work. It appears twice in our text. You see, “We are in this together,” whatever the “this” is. We share together a common faith and fellowship. We are related. We are family. We have been forged together in the crucible of faith in Jesus. We need each other. “We who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Rom. 12:5). Who are, who are, who are we? We are, we are, FBC! And the one thing we have to offer more than anything is else is this *koinonia* or fellowship.

What characterizes this true fellowship? Paul tells us in verses 3-8 <read>. Let’s not miss the most important yet invisible ingredient in this powerful passage—the tonality, or mood. The mood of this passage is not a teaching mood or an admonishing mood or an appealing mood, but a reflecting and appreciative mood with joy. We should consider and remember one another in this fashion. What’s the big idea? Like Paul, this pastor loves his people—you! What did

Paul consider worthy of noting about the Philippians that made him appreciative of them? These same ingredients make me love you as well.

I APPRECIATE YOU: A FELLOWSHIP OF INCLUSIVENESS (VV. 3, 4, 7)

Notice Paul's repeated emphasis on all. "To all the saints" (v. 1); "in all my prayer for you all" (v. 4); "for you all" (twice in v. 7); "how I long for you all" (v. 8). My extensive syntactical, theological, grammatical, contextual, and historical study of this book has led me to the following significant spiritual truth: the Apostle Paul was from Oklahoma. There are three reasons for this conclusion: (1) his repeated use of the phrase "you all;" (2) his statement in 4:11—"I have learned in whatever state I am, therein to be content;" and (3) his theme of the book—"I'm OK; You're OK." What that has to do with us in Colorado, I have no earthly idea!

Seriously, Paul intentionally includes every church member with his repeated use of the phrase, "you all." He even includes Euodia and Syntyche—two church members who weren't getting along very well at the time (4:2). Paul's heart is truly large and wide—just like the heart of God and hopefully like mine. Everybody needs a pastor; that's why they are called sheep and the pastor a shepherd. True fellowship is not selective. All fam members are included. A friend of Jesus is a friend of mine.

Extensive research shows that people today are not thinking about religion; they are feeling religion. They come into our church with their spiritual radar guns on and emotional antennae up to detect the quality of fellowship and to find out if anybody here likes them. They are searching for a place that will include them—not in a formal way, but sincerely and lovingly. A church with fellowship problems has an insurmountable mountain to climb. A church like ours with a warm, caring, stable, united fellowship is poised for growth and has the right calling card.

Folks, I thank God that our fellowship is all-inclusive. I appreciate your atmosphere of acceptance and genuine fellowship. We accept all persons no matter your age, marital status, worship preference, race, former religion, socio-economic status, professional or non-professional, urban or rural, educational level, level of spirituality, whether Republican, Democrat, or Independent, or occupation or lack of one. Our church is a reflection of heaven—folks of all kinds. True fellowship is inclusive of all. We need each other—including everyone at FBC.

I APPRECIATE YOU: A FELLOWSHIP OF BENEVOLENCE (VV. 3, 5)

As Paul remembers the Philippians, he does so with gratefulness (v. 3). He remembers the vision in the night at Troas that brought him to Philippi in the first place; he remembers the Lydia's conversion—the first European to be converted and baptized; he remembers the demon possessed girl and the beatings that followed; he remembers his imprisonment and the midnight prayer and song service, the earthquake, and the jailer's conversion.

However, he does not have any of these particular incidents in mind here. He is thankful for one particular item mentioned in verse five; verse four being an aside. From the first day they met, the Philippians had been participating with him in the sharing of the Gospel (v. 5) until ten years later—this very day of the writing of this letter from a Roman prison. How could they have done this, when they were separated except for one brief return visit by Paul? They did so by supporting him financially. The word, participation (*koinonia*), refers to financial support of Paul's ministry. They were the most generous church.

I thank God for you—a most generous church. Our per capita giving is one of the highest in the nation. Our missions giving on top of our budget is off the charts. By God's grace and for God's glory, we are known as a giving church, just as the church at Philippi was known. One of you just gave a car to our church to give it to a family in need. That just doesn't happen anywhere! Jesus loves a cheerful giver. I love our giving church.

I APPRECIATE YOU: A FELLOWSHIP OF PRAYERFULNESS (V. 4)

Paul is a model prayer warrior for all of us. His praying for the Philippians was intensely personal (my prayer for you); it was continual (always); it was all-inclusive (you all); it was alive (with joy). The word Paul uses for prayer is not the general word for prayer, but a word meaning lack, or need. Paul interceded for these Christians to have their needs met—needs of unity, humility and mutual concern. When he interceded, it was with joy.

Folks, let's continue to be a fellowship of prayerfulness. Let's pray personally, continually, and joyfully. True fellowship involves praying for one another. If you are not involved in a small group of believers who pray together, you are missing an important element of fellowship—the prayers of God's people. Join us as we strive to become a truly praying church. It is in the crucible of prayer that we are forged together as a fellowship. Even as Christians are separated, they remain close in prayer. There are some people I don't see but once or twice a year, but because I pray for them regularly, we pick up where we leave off each time we meet.

How I love praying for you—whether it is praying through our church’s membership roll, prospective members, non-Christians, praying for our church’s leaders, praying for you on your birthday and anniversary, or when you are in a chronic negative condition or in a crisis. You see, when you love someone, prayer for them comes easy. Your prayer life is an indication of your concern and interest in those persons and ministries. True fellowship is continued through personal, continual, and joyful praying for others. How I appreciate your prayers for your pastors and church. We need each other’s prayers; let’s keep it up and see God do marvelous things!

I APPRECIATE YOU: A FELLOWSHIP OF CONFIDENCE (V. 6)

Good beginnings are easy. Strong finishes are difficult. Paul was confident that the Philippian’s good beginning would be equaled by their strong finish. God never begins something that He does not intend nor is unable to finish. Proverbs 4:18 says, “But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, that shines brighter and brighter until the full day (noontime).” Church growth guru John Maxwell says, “The pastor’s greatest friend is the ‘Big Mo’ (momentum).” I hope you sense this great season of blessing we are in. You can sense it in the air. It is because of the Lord’s confidence in us. I believe in you, dear people. Thank you for your confidence in us when we launched by faith into our children’s building project when nobody is building children’s buildings. Thanks for believing in our challenging mission offering goals or sending strategies for missionaries and pastors. Thanks for catching a vision for a SBC seminary on our campus when that was unheard of. The best is yet to come! Jesus is saying the same thing to us He told the blind men in Matthew 9:29, “According to your faith, be it done to you.” Jesus is waiting for churches like ours to believe Him for incredible things. Let’s be that church!

To experience true fellowship, we, like Paul, must believe the best of one another. There is so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best of us, it doesn’t do any of us any good to talk about the rest of us. To experience true fellowship, we must have confidence in one another; we must trust one another; we must believe that God will complete what He began in each other’s lives. Sometimes we fail and need to be confronted, but still we have confidence in the Lord working in their lives. As Henri Nouwen points out, “We are unified by our common weaknesses, our common failures, our common disappointments and our common inconsistencies.” That being said, we have most remarkable church. We don’t fight, fuss, argue, gripe, or backbite and I love you guys for it.

We need each other to remain loyal. Studies done on POWs reveal that soldiers were not sustained primarily by their faith in their country or the rightness of the cause for which they were fighting. They drew their greatest strength from the close attachments they had formed to the units to which they belonged. It was further learned that POWs did not break down from physical deprivation and torture as quickly as they did from solitary confinement or from disrupted friendships. Attempts to divide men in their attitudes toward one another proved to be the most successful method of demoralizing prisoners. This division in the church begins when the confidence level begins to break down. We need to have confidence in one another and the work the Lord is doing in their lives. I love you for your confidence. May our tribe increase.

I APPRECIATE YOU: A FELLOWSHIP OF FONDNESS (VV. 7-8)

Paul feels deeply about the Philippians. Of the twenty-three uses of the word, feel, by Paul, ten of them occur in this book. It was natural for Paul to feel this way because they shared God’s grace together (v. 7).

Paul does an unusual thing here in verse 8. He takes an oath. Evidently, there were those in the church he loved who did not believe in his right to lead them nor were they certain of his love for them. What more could he do to convince them than to take a solemn oath?

Paul and the Philippians were intimately related. The church joined him in his troubles and defeats as well as in his triumphs and victories. Folks, we are related. We are family. My victory is yours and your victory is mine. We think of one another with fondness, for we have each other in our hearts. I think of you with fondness as I have thought of no other church I have pastored. You guys are easy to love.

How did the relationship between Paul and the Philippians grow so intimately? We are talking about inclusiveness, benevolence, prayerfulness, confidence, and fondness—characteristics you see in our church. The answer goes back to Paul’s key word in this passage—participation (v. 5) or partakers (v. 7). The Greek word used here again is *koinonia* or a sharing of life together.

Beverly and I enjoyed a day in the Muir Woods of Northern California (pic). Those huge redwood trees are amazing. They are the largest living things on earth and the tallest trees in the world. Some of them are 300 feet high and more than 2,500 years old. You would think that trees that large would have a tremendous root system, reaching down hundreds of feet into the earth. But that is not the case. Redwoods have a very shallow root system of 6-12 feet deep. The roots of these trees are, however, intertwined. They are tied in with each other; interlocked as each tree’s roots are up to 100-feet wide. So when the

storms come and the winds blow, the redwoods still stand. With an interlocking root system they support and sustain each other—just like FBC. They need one another to survive. FBC—so do we! Our church's effectiveness depends on the degree of true fellowship we enjoy.

A pastor in Arkansas was at the church office on a Saturday. The phone rang and someone said, "I'd like to order 5 pounds of BBQ ribs, 1 pound of Cole slaw and a half dozen hush puppies." "I'm sorry; you must have the wrong number," the pastor said. "You mean you aren't selling the BBQ ribs special?" the caller continued. "No. We're not in the BBQ business." the pastor said. "Then what business are you in?" the caller asked. The pastor pondered that question after he hung up. What was their business? Folks, we are in the relationship business; more specifically, the fellowship business. We are a service organization spiritually created by Jesus Christ to offer a relationship with Him and fellowship with one another. I had some friends visit our church recently from out of town and after the service, this is what they said, "We've got to have some of that!" When you have a people in love with Jesus and a pastor and people in love with one another, the sky is the limit! Who are, who are, who are we? We are, we are, FBC! Church: I appreciate you; sure do, sure do!

I am going to interview one of our newer member couples—Chris and Ashley Cook, to further illustrate what I am trying to say (interview Cooks).

Now what does all this have to do with our relationship to the world? Jesus said that they will know that we are Christians by our love for one another. The pagans of the first century said of the Christians, "Behold, how they love one another!" Jesus prayed that we would be one that the world may believe that God sent Jesus into it. Jesus' reputation is at stake in our fellowship.

On June 5, 2002, Elizabeth Smart was kidnapped from her home in Salt Lake City at knifepoint. Her mother came on television with her father who said, "Honey, if you are able to see this, please know that we love you so much and we will do anything possible to bring you home." Their work paid off as she was rescued nine months later on March 12, 2003, eighteen miles from her home. Folks, that's our mantra—we will do anything possible to bring you home to Jesus and FBC. Everyone needs true fellowship. Let's offer it to them in the name of Jesus.

Central Idea of Text (CIT): Paul shares his fondness with the Philippian Christians.

Big Idea of Message (BIM): The Pastor loves his people.

Major Objective (MO): Ethical

Specific Objective (SO): I desire FBC to know how much I love them.

Primarily Addressed Need (PAN): What does true fellowship look like?