


A view from my pew as a pastor-turned-parishioner

Reflections on Philippians

Elsie M. Epp

Row 6, seat 2, just off the center aisle is where you will find me on most Sunday mornings. It's more or less in the middle of the gathered community. I am surrounded by numerous others, mostly seniors. In some ways it has become my spiritual home base. I got here, not because it was my

first choice, but because three different individuals invited my spouse and me to come. By now I can readily say that it is a good place.



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I have made the transition from sitting in my office chair or standing behind the pulpit to being seated in this “comfortable pew.” Perhaps “familiar pew” would be a more accurate description.

The pew hasn't changed over the years, but in subtle ways I am realizing that I am changing as the years go by. By the time you read this, I will have passed another milestone, my eightieth birthday. It is from that perspective that I now sing and pray and hear the words of Scripture read and preached. Allow me to illustrate by inviting you to read through Philippians with me. This book is such a treasure with many wonderful themes, but I have chosen only a few that particularly resonate or speak to me at this stage of my life.

Love for the church

Philippi was a metropolitan city out on the far-flung frontier of the Roman Empire and in our day might well be considered a desirable tourist destination. What intrigues me is not its location or its economy or even its citizens, like the entrepreneur Lydia or the distraught jailor. Rather, it is the intervention of the Spirit of Jesus Christ that led to such a deep and abiding relationship between this church and the apostle Paul.

Paul reflects on this relationship as he finds himself restrained in prison with a lot of time to think. I suspect that among other things he must have reviewed the circumstances that led him to being in Philippi in the first place. It's not hard for me to identify with Paul in his experience of discerning God's leading. According to Acts 16, he muddled around much of Asia Minor trying to find that open door before finally a vision

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came with a loud and clear call from Macedonia. The perspective of hindsight becomes such a gift to seniors like me in helping to recognize where God was leading in the past.

I recognize that Paul was not elderly, but by the time of writing he was certainly aware that the end of his earthly life could come at any time. I think I hear

the tone of an elder as he writes to and about the church at Philippi. Perhaps absence had made the heart grow fonder? In any event, this is a love letter to a significant group of people—a church with whom he feels a deep connection. Rarely do I think of Paul as a feeling person, but it is a character trait I'm drawn to more and more as I age. I note particularly in chapter 1 how he longs to be with them in person, how he affectionately refers to them as “my beloved” (2:12) and “my joy and crown” (4:1).

He sees their relationship as being a partnership. He relies on their prayers and even their financial support, but they need his encouragement and even his exhortations to grow in joyful faith. He addresses his words to “all the saints” along with the leaders—the bishops and deacons. He describes this mutuality by repeatedly referring to “all of you” (1:4, 8, 25, 26). I find here a church with a kind of interdependence and collaboration—an inclusive church for all, and I take that to be for all ages as well.

Growing in faith and faithfulness together

Today I appreciate the ministries and caring provided for my age group, but I am not ready yet to just receive and not have an opportunity to also give. In the past year, I had the opportunity to mentor a student intern, to be part of starting a new parish nurse program, and to participate in a circle of blessing at the ordination of one of our pastors. I am no longer able to contribute in long-term assignments, but such one-time opportunities were such an affirmation for me. Perhaps that reflects my well-ingrained Anabaptist/Mennonite heritage that stresses that as a disciple my faith

needs to be expressed through actions. Therein lies a dilemma: Am I still to be a disciple at my age? If so, then what does the Lord require of me?

Elaborating a little more on the theme of “all of you,” I wish that in our society—and particularly in the church—that phrase might mean “all of you *together*.” I do enjoy my peers, but I would so much like to have more friendships with those from younger generations. Even as Paul needed Timothy and Epaphroditus and Euodia and Syntyche and Clement, I need young people in my life and church. I need them to strengthen my hope for the future of the church. I need them to help me adapt to changing times by teaching me to sing new songs in a strange and foreign era. I need them to teach me other ways of praying and meditating. I would like to laugh and cry with them even as I would like them to receive my stories and struggles and even to consider my counsel. I admit that I do not always understand their thoughts or how they do things in their tech-savvy world or why we should make changes. Yet I firmly believe in and desire the unity Paul promotes, which is not dependent on total agreement on all matters.

Joy in the struggle

As I read Philippians, I am drawn to how Paul so openly shares about some of the hard stuff he is encountering. I am impressed with his transparency and vulnerability. As I age, I find I have little patience for pretense and sentimental clichés. I long to talk about how to come to terms with losses and how to embrace the road before me, which in all likelihood will include physical limitations. I need to find creative ways to remain connected to those most dear to me who are far removed from me while at the same time learning more generally about being alone without being overcome by loneliness. And what about the goal I’m still pressing toward?

As Paul moves toward the end of this letter, he seems ever mindful that he has not yet arrived as a faithful apostle. He describes suffering, dying and death, and letting go of the past while at the same time holding fast to what he has attained and coming to terms with losses. And still there is more to pursue. Yet amid this sense of urgency he claims to have found contentment. Earlier in my spiritual journey as I entered retirement, I would have identified arriving at contentment as a worthy goal and perhaps even as my ultimate goal. Today it still seems good, but I now see there is something else to strive for that is even better—namely, joy.

For Paul that joy comes in being able “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection” (3:10, 11). An overview of this letter highlights that the main theme or goal is to discover joy. Joy as expressed in its various forms appears sixteen times in Philippians. In some ways, to know joy is an inner experience, a feeling that is mysterious yet known with certainty. It is found in relationship to the Lord, and it is something we actively participate in: “rejoice in the Lord” (3:1; 4:4). At the same time, it is closely tied to relationships in community. It is bound up with praying for one another, serving and caring for each other, welcoming others through genuine hospitality, and delighting in the spiritual growth and faithfulness of others. I personally experience joy, for example, when someone takes the step of expressing their commitment to Jesus Christ through the act of baptism or when I become aware of someone emerging as having the gift of caregiving or worship leading or welcoming strangers. For me this is a new insight: that I can find joy through appreciating what God is doing in and through the lives of others. And that joy can even be multiplied when I respond with thanksgiving directly or in prayer.

Conclusion

I thank you for joining me in my reading of Philippians as I have tried to note some themes that seem particularly relevant to me at my stage of life. The first is my growing awareness of how much I love the church and how much I long to remain meaningfully connected. A second theme is my yearning to share deeply in order to grow in faith and faithfulness. And, finally, there is the theme of the goal of discovering joy!

About the author

Elsie M. Epp was one of the first women to be ordained in what is now MC Canada and served in various pastoral roles for twenty-nine years. She is a former nurse and a retired pastor. Elsie served two congregations—one in Saskatchewan and the other in Ontario—and was a Conference Minister for Saskatchewan. She always worked together with her husband, Delmer Epp. She experienced particular joy through initiating two programs, a parish nurse ministry in a congregation and a bereavement care program for an oncology department in a hospital. She is currently a member of Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba.