

A Share in First Church

Philippians 1:3-11
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First Presbyterian Church
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An old legend tells of the four angels present at creation. The first angel said to God, “My Lord, what a wonderful, beautiful world! How did you do it?” That angel went on to become history’s first scientist.

The second angel said to God, “My Lord, what a wonderful, beautiful world. Why did you do it?” That angel went on to become history’s first theologian and philosopher.

The third angel said to God, “My Lord, what a wonderful, beautiful world. Can I have it?” That angel went on to write the script for the movie Wall Street.

The fourth angel said to God, “My Lord, what a wonderful, beautiful world. Can I help?” And legend has it, that angel went on to become Gan Johnson, the founder of First Presbyterian Church of Independence, in April 1826.

It’s been nearly 200 years since Gan Johnson – and yes, it’s Gan with a “g” – since Gan Johnson brought together a group of fellow Christians to launch our church.

Two centuries later, what connection do we have to them? Through 200 years of ups and downs, how do you measure progress? How do we remain connected to these founding fathers and mothers of ours? What, if anything, do we owe to them, today?

The Church at Philippi must have been asking the same questions, based on what the Apostle Paul said in his letter to the Philippians.

Paul had visited Philippi about 10 years earlier, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. That visit gave rise to a church at Philippi, as those who listened to him, those who were touched and inspired by what he said began organizing house meetings, where they got together for worship, Christian education, fellowship, and missions. These earliest Christian house meetings were not unlike the house meeting organized by Gan Johnson in 1826.

What would Gan Johnson write to us if he were to write a letter to the future? Perhaps it would be similar to the letter Paul wrote to the Philippians, the letter handed down to us today.

The Philippians knew that Paul was writing to them from prison, sentenced to be executed by the Roman Empire, martyred for the faith. So, they must have wondered what was to become of them! I mean, if Paul, their founder, is in prison, destined to be gone from the earth in just two short years, what is to become of them?!?

Don’t we wonder the same thing – what is to become of us - as members of this church pass away generation after generation? Maybe not all of us have wondered this, but those

who've been here for a while can't help but notice the decline in church attendance, here and at most churches these days.

In response to any such doubts about the future of the church, Paul offers the Philippians – and us – words of reassurance, saying “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”

Paul is so confident and happy about this that he says, “I thank my God every time I remember you ... because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.”

Paul would have been – and is – as thankful for First Presbyterian Church as he was for the church at Philippi, because the church at Philippi and the church at Pleasant and Lexington both have a share in the gospel, as Paul says, going all the way back to the beginning of Christianity, and extending all the way forward to Christ's return.

When you give or share your time, talents and treasure at church, you are given in return a share in the ministry of all those who've gone before us and all who come after us. Likewise, your active participation also gives you a share in the current ministry of First Presbyterian Church, all the good works we do in this day and age.

I could give you thousands of examples of all the acts of ministry and blessing that you share in as a member or friend of this church. But that would take too long and I'd leave too many people out – I couldn't mention it all. So let me share with you an example of the type of ministry I'm talking about.

There was an elderly widow who wanted to serve her church, but she didn't know what she could possibly do, given her restricted activity level. So, she prayed about it. And as she prayed, she realized she could bring blessing to others by playing the piano.

The next day she placed a small ad in the Oakland Tribune saying, “Pianist will play hymns by phone daily for those who are sick and despondent – the service is free.”

When people called, she would ask, “What hymn would you like to hear?” And wouldn't you know it, within a few months her playing had brought thanksgiving and joy to several hundred people. And on top of that, many of them freely poured out their hearts to her, and she was able to help and encourage them in ways only God could have foreseen.¹

As a fellow Christian, you have a share in that ministry and all the ministry done in the name of Jesus Christ, from the first church that Jesus brought together to the everlasting church at Christ's return.

¹ <https://www.homileticonline.com/members/installment/3213>

That everlasting connection from our past through to our future is the assurance we receive through Paul's letter to the Philippians. And there's more, more for us to ponder regarding our ministry today.

Paul goes on to say, "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on 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."

That Paul; what a mouthful! What I hear in that prayer is that we have a future to live into and a sacred trust to maintain. The life that Paul envisions for us as members of the church he planted, the church Gan Johnson planted, the church that all the faithful of generations past gave their lives to – the life that he lays out for us today is one of Christian love overflowing, divine knowledge and insight, everyone made pure and blameless in Christ, as together we produce the harvest of righteousness for the glory and praise – not of ourselves – but of God.

It is God who began a good work among us and it is God who will see it through, as long as we continue participating in the ministry of this church, confident in our heritage through the churches Paul planted, and our future in the church that the Lord will bring – is bringing – in the fullness of Christ to come. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

With gratitude we come to you in prayer, gracious God. For the gift of life and daily blessings, we offer you our thanks and praise.

Especially we thank you for your presence when we come to you amid our struggles and darkest moments – moments not of faith but of fear; not of certainty but doubt.

When we are overwhelmed with anxious questions, O God, help us to be still. Remind us of all that we have which assures us of your love for us.

In the midst of our darkness, let us be reminded that you enter into our pain and bring faith amid our fear and doubt.

We pray your healing touch and restorative power upon those dealing with illness and disease. Next to needs such as this and greater needs experienced by your people, O Lord, we come to know and appreciate all that we have. Though we sometimes feel that we have so little, we know in our hearts that, in fact, we have everything we need. Because, Lord, we have you in our lives and the blessings of God showered upon us.

So it is with thanksgiving that we come to you in prayer, using the words that you taught us, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.