

Carlisle UMC  
Sermon Series: Study on Philippians  
March 3 2019  
Sunday after General Conference 2019  
Rev. Mira Hewlett & Rev. Jim VanZandt  
Philippians 1:3-11

### God in our Midst

#### **Pastor Mira**

Today we conclude our sermon series looking at themes in the book of Philippians. Pastor Jim has looked at themes in each of the four chapters, and today will focus on how Paul opens and closes this letter. But first, let's begin in prayer.

*Dear God, open our ears to hear you, our eyes to see you, and our hearts to be moved by you. Amen.*

As Pastor Jim said in his announcements, it's been quite a week. Catholics are considering their special conference on sexual abuse, our denomination voted on LGBTQ clergy and marriage, and daily there seems to be a new report on national political leadership and Congressional hearings. That's just national news. We have all had days, weeks and even seasons when things are tough – a diagnosis is confirmed, harsh words with family members, a warning or layoff at work, and so many more things.

Our scripture today comes from the New Testament book of Philippians that was written by Paul when things were challenging in his life as well. He first met the Philippians on his second missionary journey as he and Timothy traveled to teach communities about Christ. In Philippi they met Lydia, a successful businesswoman with a tender heart who after learning of Christ opened her home to believers and helped finance Paul's ministry. They met a woman possessed with demons. Paul changed her life casting out the demon, but also landed himself in jail for ruining her master's profits. These people were part of the church in Philippi.

Ten years later Paul writes this letter, which is mostly about joy and how to find joy in one's life, from a Roman prison later in his life and ministry. If I were to write a letter from prison, my letter would likely be filled with "I can't believe this is happening to me, again" or "I can't stand this place or these people" but Paul's letter is different.

Paul begins and ends his letter giving thanks to God for God's work in and through the people of Philippi. Paul does not take this letter, or any of his letters to churches he mentored, to mourn the trials and tribulations of his own life. He begins in a place that challenges and encourages me – he begins and ends with giving thanks to God in and through challenging and uncertain times.

Paul sees every circumstance in his life as an experience of God's grace. His mindset of always focused on thanking God. He doesn't ask God to change the Philippians, or even intercedes on what they are struggling with, but instead he begins and ends with giving God thanks for how God is working and moving in and through them. Paul's mindset is focused on recognizing God's presence and giving thanks in his midst, even from behind prison walls.

Last Saturday through Tuesday the General Conference of the UMC met to discuss our church laws around the ordination and marriage of LGBTQ members. 856 representatives from around the world met in St Louis looking for a way forward representing diverse cultures, nations, and theological standpoints among the elected clergy and lay members. After three days of heated conversation and debate the Traditionalist Plan was affirmed. The Traditional Plan keeps the current language around homosexuality and increases accountability by streamlining the processes to enforce penalties for violations of The Book of Discipline related to marriage and ordination of homosexual persons. Some parts of the Traditional Plan were ruled unconstitutional and the entire plan was referred to the Judicial Council for review April 23-26<sup>th</sup>. Once the Judicial Council rules, parts deemed constitutional will go into effect January 2020.

Pastor Jim is going to share his thoughts on what this means for our church and where God is in the midst of all that we have seen in national and local news stories related to our denomination's decision.

### **Pastor Jim**

Q: Where is God in our midst now here at CUMC?

A: The same place God has always been – in us and around us, and every time we look at the cross, we are reminded of God with us the incarnation of God in Jesus – God in the flesh – God in our midst. In Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

This week reminded me once again that the church has always had differing opinions and controversies, from the earliest church in the book of Acts and forward. It is not new and neither should it be scary for God is in it all.

Right now we are all still reacting to the decision that came out of the special General Conference – and trying to understand what it means for our present and our future. It's not a time for fear, but of recalibration of what the church needs to be and what it is to do – with a new determination of how we will individually and collectively live out our call to follow Jesus.

Nothing that happened last week changed the mission or vision of CUMC to Live Like Jesus. Neither has it changed the two greatest commandments that Jesus told us about: Love God and love one another. We probably now need to do it in a more determined and passionate way.

Instead of retreat, it's a call to press on even faster in response to the Great Commission in Matthew 28 to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The local church and where we live and share our lives together is where that best can be done – not by a denomination.

Our local church is the place that each week we are called to remember:

1. That no matter what happens, God is always in our midst.
2. God's mercy and love cannot be extinguished.
3. Jesus never leaves or forsakes us.
4. God hears our every prayer.
5. Our afflictions are momentary in light of eternity.
6. Jesus is still Lord and Savior.

And in that truth, the common ground, the place where we all stand on equal footing is in our need for the grace of God shown at the foot of the cross – no matter which opinion or "side" we are on.

My warning to us all today is to not be deceived into believing that the side you stand on, no matter the depth of your passion, makes you righteous. We can so easily fall into the trap of thinking that if we're on the "Right Side" I am therefore righteous in God's eyes – that's the Devil's lie.

According to Scripture and the testimony of Jesus, only his shed blood and sacrifice, dying for all of our sin, makes us righteous and heaven worthy. Our response to that truth is what counts in this life.

John Wesley – the pioneer of what became Methodism wrote, "Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?" That's what we need to do together – love God and one another.

If you want to do that – and join with other people who want to do that in a place of encouragement and hope, then do it with us here at CUMC.

I know some have contemplated leaving the church. Don't leave yet. That won't make you more righteous. There is more to the story – more to be worked out in the coming months – details yet to be shared, and there is another conference in spring of 2020.

And don't quit giving either – though you may well be tempted to. We all vote with our attendance and our wallets. Giving really is a spiritual issue between you and God. Withholding the tithe only hurts the local church.

In the winter of 2012, members of the churches of Allison, First and Grace took a vote to decide whether they should join together or not. A lot of folks thought it would never happen

Over the next two years we had many obstacles and adversities to overcome while we were putting together a formal plan to mesh together everything. Many said it would fall apart. Yet in that time God blessed us with two one million dollar gifts.

Two years later we were working on plans to build a new building which many thought would never happen.

And now some are saying we will not survive the latest adversity. This church survived through all of what came before last week, and it will survive this too. Never bet against what God can do. It may be a rough ride for a while, but that's the glorious thing with God in our midst – the twisty, rocky mountain pass eventually opens up into the wide plain of promise – both for us as individuals and for us as a church.

Don't leave now. You will want to be here. God is never finished molding the body of Christ.

### **Pastor Mira**

God is in our midst, even in this time of waiting for more information, and in our midst as we continue to do ministry within and beyond these walls to live and love like Jesus.

On a more personal level, many of our lives have events and seasons that draw us to question where God is and how can we give thanks when things are not all rosy. The Bonn family in our congregation has faced this question since their son Owen was diagnosed with cancer in both eyes days. Check this out video (found online here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O\\_V2TFvXE74](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_V2TFvXE74))

(Summary of Bonn video... Owen was diagnosed with retinoblastoma, eye cancer in both eyes, two days after his second birthday. Today he's 5 years old recently had his cataract off on his right eye, last year one off on his left eye. They shared about where they have seen God in this process. Owen has seen God in hotels, Thon, church, family, friends and school. Marsha, mom, explained they would never have come to CUMC

unless it was for his cancer diagnosis. Church family and beyond have sent cards, made them meals and ask all the time how they are doing. They have gained a family at THON (Penn State kids cancer fundraiser) and they are a better family now because of how God has brought their family closer together. She said they had the choice to be better or bitter. Cancer has taught them what really matters in life. When faced with a hard time in life, choose better. Thank you to our church family for helping us see God in this all.)

The Bonns are uncertain about the news at Owen's next appointment. We are living in uncertain times as the United Methodist Church – times when we don't have all the answers and there are some in our church today feeling affirmed by the decision and others feeling heartbroken. Paul was uncertain about his immediate future. And yet even from his prison cell unsure what was next, Paul's mindset was one where he always saw God in his midst and gave God thanks for how God was working in and through the Philippians and the ministry they were doing in their local community.

Giving thanks to God isn't only for times when we agree politically with issues in our church, country, or world. Or when life is wonderful and without challenge. Paul wrote to the Philippians: *I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.* May we take these words of Paul to heart. May we give thanks for God IS in our midst and may we continue to be focused on sharing the Gospel, the love of Christ, with each other in this church even if we don't all agree on everything, with those in our community who live like us and those who don't, and with those beyond Carlisle. May our legacy 10 years from now be one that we write back and see and say....."well done, church." You knew how to live like Jesus. Amen.