

Learning and Reaching out Together in Love

Philippians 1:3–11

Matthew 5: 13–16

Exodus 3: 1–12a

by Rev. Lara Scholey

We can imagine the early church community of Philippi gathering together in the market square to hear a letter read from their leader Paul. He has journeyed with them since their formation. They miss him. They remember his teachings and his encouragement. They are excited and eager to hear his words, like the anticipation we feel when an email arrives from an old friend or mentor.

The beginnings of Paul's letters in Scripture are beautiful. Unlike the emails that we send today, Paul takes his time, revealing a prayer. His opening words are full of promise, hope, and thanksgiving, as he reflects on the gifts and strengths of that particular community of faith. He gives thanks to God for them, and for the way that they, as a faith community, reveal Christ's light to the world.

Every one of Paul's letters begins with thanksgiving. It was the style of correspondence at the time, but it is nowhere more evident than in this letter to the Philippians. It contains the longest greeting recorded in scripture. Paul's words reflect an intimate relationship as he reconnects with the faithful Christians in Philippi.

Before long, Paul points to the challenges that are ahead. He empowers them to be ready and faithful in the crucial time to come. Philippians is written by Paul as he is in prison, persecuted for his beliefs as a Christian. Paul's faith is real and found in the nitty gritty of a troubled world. He expresses the challenge and heartache of being a person of faith. The letter is full of hope even as he writes from this difficult place.

Mission is all about reaching out to difficult places. We reach out to groups of people we could easily

ignore. As it says in Living Faith: Mission is service, a call to help people in need and to permeate all of life with the compassion of God. (Living Faith 9.1.3). In reaching out, we share the good news of Christ. Rooted in our hope in Jesus, we share God's love by our actions or by our words.

Reaching out begins with love. It begins with the strength we find in learning and serving together. As Paul whispers from prison, he prays that the Philippians will overflow in their love for God. He goes on to talk about active love lived out in a Christian community. He writes, "may your love overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight, and help you determine what is best." (Philippians 1:9,10a) Sometimes, we need to love before we know. We need to serve before we discern.

When we are willing to reach out in love, we find ourselves in places and meeting people we never expected. By God's grace, we step into a whole new world, a world that we never expected to enter. The Rev. Lara Scholey, a minister in rural Nova Scotia, feels blessed to have stepped into a few different worlds during her life. She stepped into the world of disability and rehabilitation, when her father became a quadriplegic; into the world of multiple children and their parents when she gave birth to triplets; and into the world of relief and development through travel with Presbyterian World Service & Development (PWS&D). She says, "When you enter a new world, you think, how did I never know that this world existed? In the case of disability, how did I not realize there were rehab hospitals where people stayed for months, and are taught to move or dress or function in new ways?" In time, we may step out of a world. It may no longer touch us as directly as it did before. But we are forever changed, transformed by the experience of being in the midst of it.

Every one of us has been enabled by God to step into worlds that we never expected to enter. Worlds of new careers, of parenthood or relationships, worlds of grief or illness, worlds of leadership, mission and service. Each time we step into a new world, as people of faith, we seek to figure out what we are being called to do as our eyes are opened. When our compassion grows, we gain knowledge and insight. We discern new relationships and new ways to reach out.

Mission is how we reach out in faith. We learn about families fleeing Syria as refugees, or women in Malawi giving birth under difficult circumstances. When we talk about what it must be like for young people to train for ministry in the turbulent Middle East, or what it must be like for sex-trade workers

in Toronto who struggle to find a way out, we learn about new worlds and are moved to respond. Doing this work together is so much more powerful than doing it on our own. Whether we connect with people through technology or in person, we are moved and challenged and enlightened. We are touched by the Spirit as we talk to one another, as we combine our resources to respond to the most vulnerable in need.

Paul draws strength in prison by knowing that others are praying for him. You may have experienced a time in your life when you were overcome with illness or grief, and others cared for you. They lifted you up in prayer at a time when you barely had the energy to pray yourself, and this brought you strength.

When we travel to other countries, on behalf of The Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC), people tell us that it matters to them that people in Canada are praying for them, and care enough to help them. When we support projects through PWS&D, International Ministries and Canadian Ministries, or a local mission through Women's Missionary Society (WMS)/Atlantic Mission Society (AMS), it is not simply a transfer of money. Members are educated, a relationship is built, trips are made by WMS/AMS members or PCC staff to meet our partners and the recipients. People are asked what they need. They draw strength from our prayers and our support. We draw strength from knowing them and hearing their stories.

Lara Scholey says, "I was talking to a little girl after church in Indore, North India. I said that we were praying for Christians in North India. I was surprised when she thanked me and said, 'We will pray for your church in Canada.'" When I have met with our church partners in Malawi, India, Afghanistan, and Haiti, I have learned that they are strengthened by our faith and our mission. Being in their presence, I am strengthened and blessed by their determination, their faith, and their willingness to reach out and help the most vulnerable in their communities. Through PWS&D, mothers gather at prenatal clinics in rural Afghanistan to support one another by sharing their stories and frustrations. Farmers in Guatemala teach one another new farming practices, and volunteer home-based care workers meet to share challenges and successes as they care for people with HIV or AIDS in their own community.

Relationships are also built in local mission and outreach. In love for our community, we share time and resources, and figure out how to meet needs. Every time children excitedly bound off the bus and down the stairs of a church on a weekday afternoon, the Spirit is present. Every time a group of youth gather and fill a church member's home with talking and laughter, it invigorates all of us with new life, even though we may never see them on Sunday morning. Amid the meal shared, the games and stories, they learn about girls their age going to school in Afghanistan, or about youth like them who find themselves at a local homeless shelter. Youth are encouraged to share what they have learned with friends who are vulnerable. Coins are gathered to help children around the world to go to school. Children share their well-loved toys with a local organization that gives them to families in need. During the discussion, children and youth ask questions, serious questions, about mission and faith. Love and fun overflows, and these relationships lead to knowledge, insight and the desire to respond. Children, youth, and adult leaders are blessed.

The needs of our communities and the world can be overwhelming. We may not feel like we have enough resources, energy, or know how to reach out in mission. But we have been called by God to discern our role and to play our part. We have access to amazing resources. We discover an ability to learn, and a font of wisdom already present in our congregations and mission groups. By learning from one another, beginning with our overflow of compassion as Paul suggests, we discern how to do mission locally and globally.

As we do, we seek to bring about the Kingdom that Christ spoke so much about, where the last are first and there is abundant life for all. We let Christ's light shine through us, and we see people around us near and far, similar and different, as God's beloved children.

You may not travel to far away countries and communities or be locked in a prison cell. Yet, each one of you are being called by God to walk into places of challenge and chaos, to reach out in compassion, and to pray for peace. You are called to shine a light of love and hope in difficult places: at the bedside of a family member who is depressed; with a youth who has gotten into trouble; with a friend distressed by the abrupt end to a relationship, with a parent who grieves the child they lost through estrangement or illness; or with a woman who grieves the child they were never able to have. You

have walked those paths, stepping into different worlds. With God's help, that journey will continue.

We are called to reach out to the vulnerable in our communities and around the world. The WMS, AMS and other outreach or mission committees enable us to work together to do mission. In our small groups, we learn together and challenge one another to be generous and to reach out. Rooted in our love for Jesus Christ, we carry out this work. (Share examples of some of your group's work during the past year.)

As sisters and brothers in Christ, you are being present in His name—praying, helping, hoping, having faith. Paul challenges the Philippians and all of us to continue our good work, and to grow in love. He wrote, 'the God who began a good work in you will bring it to completion in Christ.' With the eyes of faith, it is possible. Paul is confident in God's activity among the Philippians in the early church long ago. His words speak to us today.

Live out your many callings to love and work and serve. How can we as God's people, as a church, as WMS or AMS groups, overflow in love and reach out in mission? The God who began a good work in you will finish what He started. Thanks be to God! Amen.

The worship resources for Mission Awareness Sunday have been written by the Rev. Lara Scholey. Rev Lara Scholey serves a 2 point charge in rural Nova Scotia, where she has been for 14 years—Burns Memorial, West Branch, and Bethel, Scotsburn. Her congregations have a passion for Christian Education and for Mission. She is presently convenor of the PWS&D committee, having travelled to Malawi, India, Afghanistan and Haiti. Lara grew up at St Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Brampton, ON and spent summers in Gravenhurst. She lives in Scotsburn with her husband, Dr. Carl Adams, a physics professor at St FX University. They have 3 children—Matthew, Isaac and Charlotte Adams, all 12 years old, who teach her so much about life and faith and reaching out.