



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Connection”

Philippians 1:3-11

George C. Anderson

Before I get to my sermon, I want to take a moment to say something of the man who stood in this pulpit on most Sundays for 28 years. Dr. William R. Klein, a scholar with a poet’s sensibility, preached the sermons of an introvert. He would clue in his secretary that he was going to the “boiler room.” That told her that he was going to a remote and unused room in the church that was completely bare except for a desk, a chair and a window. He was not to be disturbed. Then, when he preached the next Sunday, the sermon was as much a conversation with God as a message to this congregation.

I knew when I came to Second that I would be preaching to a congregation trained by Bill and others to listen closely to sermons. I also knew that because of good leadership, of which Bill was no small part, I was coming to a church that valued youth and families, that sought to train both the mind and heart, was committed to local mission, and was a strong partner with the seminary that trained most of her pastors.

Dr. Klein, the Introvert-Minister, loved moments of quiet in worship. I want to begin my Prayer for Illumination with a moment of silence in which we can give thanks for his life and ministry before then asking for God’s Word to be spoken once again from the pulpit where Bill stood so many times.

Let us Pray.

(Moment of Silence)



Holy God, in remembering Bill, we thank you for his sharing the Gospel in this pulpit and place not only with his words but also with the witness of his life. Speak now Your living Word through the words of scripture and sermon, and through what witness to others is then inspired in us. Amen.

³ I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴ constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵ because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ 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. ⁷ It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰ to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹ having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Some of Pablo Picasso's art finally makes sense to me. At least I think so. I am thinking of those portraits he painted of shattered faces. All the right pieces are in view—brow, nose, mouth, eyes, chin, neck—but they don't fit together. They are not in the right places.

an eye is above the forehead,
a nose juts off the left side of the face,
a mouth is located in the right cheek.

These disconnected faces make more sense these days because this feels like a disconnected world. I won't say much about it, but politics has disconnected us. The body politic works best when there is a conservative and liberal tension, like eyes balanced on each side of the nose. It is not served when interests break off and seek to overwhelm each other. I appreciate more than ever those behind-the-scenes efforts to get things done because, despite the gaslighting and power plays, we have to keep up efforts to *stay connected as a nation in this disconnected world*.

The pandemic has disconnected us. Almost a year ago, when it became clear that it would be a while before my large, close extended family could gather together again, we organized a Zoom family get-together. It involved four generations and my computer screen was absolutely packed with tiny boxes, each with either a face or a family boxed in. We were all new to Zoom. Few of us knew then how to mute; the oldest members of the family had a hard time understanding what was said, the youngest members kept talking... and the whole experience was maybe an audio version of a Picasso portrait: a family broken into Zoom pieces. It wasn't the same as being together, but it was worth the effort because it is important that we work to *remain connected as a family in this disconnected world*.

Right now, our church life is an experience of separated pieces and parts. Committees meet by Zoom, visitors visit by phone and much of giving is done online. Early worship takes place with folks separated by empty pews. Eleven o'clock worship happens in dens, living rooms, and car interiors... and that service takes place not only during the 11:00 o'clock hour but whenever hour



the service is pulled up on YouTube. Yet, it is all worth it because it is important that the congregation does whatever it can to *remain connected in a disconnected world*.

So, I have a better appreciation of Picasso's paintings of disconnected faces.

Maybe we all can have a better appreciation for some of the Apostle Paul's writings because a major theme of his letters is how to live in a disconnected world.

That theme came partly from experience. Paul spends his entire ministry as a church planter. He lives for a bit in a town or city sharing the news of Jesus and building a community of faith devoted to following in Jesus' way. Then he moves on. The longest he ever stays in one place is two years and three months. But though he physically moves on, his heart remains with those churches. He wants them to stay connected with him and each other, even though they had so many reasons not to be... with one big reason being that some churches are *so* Jewish and some *so* Gentile.

To stay connected, he does the only thing he knows to do in a world without Zoom, Marco Polo, Instagram, Facebook, Email, phone or rapid transit. He writes letters.

As with a family gathering by Zoom, there are challenges that letters have to overcome. It can take months before a letter reaches its destination. The communication is one way, and there is no opportunity for Q & A for a point to be clarified or a confusion cleared.

And yet there's magic that come from the strain of having to do the work to stay connected. The effort needed to cross the divide can make the communication powerful and intimate. When Paul sits down to write a letter, or when he paces while a scribe writes it for him, he will have already given much advance thought to what he wants to say and how he is going to say it. Then, in the moment of writing, he has to give his complete focus. Parchment paper is not readily available and is not cheap, so to throw away a draft is a waste of resources.

The intimacy of Paul's letters involves more than Paul and the reader. His letters are like the sermons of the Introvert-Minister: as much a conversation with God as with the people he hopes reads them. Paul does his very best to somehow code his mind and heart within the words so that when the letter is read, the readers will somehow not only get his point, but encounter him... and encounter God.

Meanwhile, the churches eagerly await his letters. They anticipate the moment when they will hear a word from the one who guided them at the beginning and might offer some guidance now. Then, when the day finally arrives when someone has arrived with Paul's letter in hand, a time and place is set—probably the occasion of Sabbath worship. They cannot all gather in the same place, so the letter moves from house church to house church, and maybe to a synagogue or two, and pieces of the church community listen to the letters which are about keeping them connected.

Then, even though the letter may have taken weeks or months to arrive, when they hear the letter read it is as if time and distance disappear, and they hear Paul's words as if spoken to them that day. And if Paul's prayer is answered, they sense God's presence with them and hear his voice calling them to pull together rather than break apart. Conversation follows among the listeners as they try together to fully take in what Paul is saying to them. They ask for it to be read again so they can take in all its intended meaning and absorb whatever passion or emotion is behind the



words. It's the strain, you see, that gives the letter its power to connect. Fred Craddock described the experience as one of "intimate distance."¹

The best example of what I am talking about is the letter to the church in Philippi. Philippians is perhaps the warmest letter Paul writes. Most of Paul's other letters have to deal primarily with some conflict or controversy within the church, but this letter is different. Yes, he speaks to some dissension in the church, but Paul's primary pastoral concern seems to be fear.

You see, there is an *added* level of disconnection Paul has to overcome. Paul could not make the best-case-scenario-six-week-trip to see them even if he wanted to. He is in Roman custody. He is in prison, or maybe under house arrest. It doesn't matter. He has been incarcerated as a direct result of his being open and free about his faith. And he knows that the saints in Philippi are worried about Paul being persecuted for his faith... and they are worried they will be persecuted even more for their faith.

Maybe threat brings focus to the heart as well as the mind because, oh my goodness, is the intimacy of carefully considered words obvious in the way Paul begins his letter to the church in Philippi. "Every time I think of you, I thank God," Paul begins.

Both the last sermon I preached at First Presbyterian Church in Kingsport, TN and the last sermon I preached at Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Jackson, MS were based on this passage because I knew that every time I would remember my life and ministry with those two wonderful churches, I would thank God that I had the incredible privilege of sharing a life and ministry with them.

I planned to preach this sermon before Bill Klein died, but the verse speaks for those who knew and loved him. It speaks for everyone who ever learned of a death of someone who lived a long life and who had an impact on their lives. The news is sad, but also an opportunity for thanksgiving. It is an opportunity to excavate memories of why it was so wonderful and important that the one who died, lived.

With at least the possibility of death providing focus, Paul gives thanks. Remembering the Philippian church reminds him why his ministry among them was worth it even though it led in part to his now being in a jail cell. He thanks God because they together shared in the Gospel with each other and shared the Gospel with others around them. They shared in something that God will see to completion, even if they do not live to see it.

In fact, present tense! They are sharing in the Gospel still. How so? "Because," Paul says, he knows "they hold him in their hearts" and he holds them in his heart. They pray to the same God, they pray for each other, and together they are to going to be brave in living in the open as followers of Jesus, whether in Rome or in Philippi.

This is a love letter—not the love of romance but the love of Jesus. They love each other with God's kind of love:

selfless love for the sake of the other
and for the sake of the world—
a sacrificial love that pays a cost so others may heal—

¹ Craddock, Fred, *Philippians*, Interpretation Commentary, p. 6.



a love that cannot be locked away and should not be hidden.

It should not be hidden, Paul says, because we live in a world disconnected by sin, and the broken world won't last without the reconciling work of God's love.

Paul's view that the world is broken by sin is reflected throughout his writings. He writes of the waste that comes of greed and hoarding, of abuses of power and of weakly accepting the abuse. He writes of broken promises, broken hearts, broken families and broken communities. Bringing healing to those broken places is why Jesus lived and was why he died... and why Paul himself may later die. So God, whose love the Philippians know, wants them to show their love for the world by being a part of the world's healing because that is why the Gospel came to them to begin with.

Can you see why this letter can speak so powerfully today? Yes, we live in a disconnected world... made more obvious than normal by polarizing politics and the distancing of the pandemic. But if we seek the intimacy of God's love shared with each other and with the world, we must focus and strain to make sure that we find love's connection in this disconnected world.

As I have said in the last four sermons I preached, it begins within. It begins with your knowing that God knows you as you are and loves you, and that love can heal personal fragmentation. It then involves the strain that comes with loving others the way God loves us: to see past others' faults and sins, to follow the cords of empathy and compassion to shared humanity. It requires focus and strain... and yet, ironically, it is the focus and strain that creates the intimacy.

And so it is with God. Yes, we would like to have the advantage of the early disciples who walked and lived with Jesus. They could hear his words and with their own eyes see the example he set in dealing with his family, friends, the crowds and his enemies. But then we need to remember that they came to know Jesus better after he was physically gone. Perhaps his physical presence made it too easy. It was with the strain of separation, the strain of looking for the evidence of the Spirit in the world, the strain to remember what it was that Jesus said and did that they gained the true intimacy with Jesus that we know of as *faith*.

Let's remember that. Let's remember that especially when others try to make things easy for us again by telling us exactly who God wants us to love and hate, who we are to support or dismiss, and how God wants us to think. That is not their work to do. We need to excavate our memories and remember the Jesus of scripture and not the Jesus of political or celebrity imagination. Remember the examples of those who lived and loved well in ways that reflect Jesus. Remember the reconcilers for the Gospel of Matthew is right; they show what it means to be children of God.

I can't wait until we are all back together again. But let's see our separation right now as an opportunity to focus on staying connected in a disconnected world.

