

**St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI**

**Pastor Mark Gartner**

**Sermon for Advent 2 -- December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014**

**Philippians 1:3-6 (NIV – 1984)**

**I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**

In the name of Jesus, the Head of the Church and Lord of our lives, dear friends:

During the summer of 1904 an unlikely partnership was formed at the World's Fair in St. Louis. The summer was unusually hot and people were searching the fair for something to help cool them off. Arnold Fornachou had just what they were looking for—ice cream. People lined up for what seemed like miles to get some of his cool and satisfying ice cream. But there was a problem. Arnold was not prepared for the demand and ran out of paper bowls. He was forced to wash a few porcelain bowls over and over again. The result was too few bowls and people were getting tired of waiting.

Next to Arnold's ice cream booth was the booth of a pastry chef by the name of Ernest Hamwi. He was making a Persian wafer dessert called *zalabia*. Ernest also had a problem. His pastry wasn't selling. However, he noticed the problem Arnold was having and took some warm zalabia and rolled it into a cone shape. He then went over and showed Arnold how the zalabia could hold a scoop of ice cream. On that hot day during the World's Fair, the ice cream cone was born because a partnership was formed.

Partnership is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results. It involves commitment and passion. Employees of a firm are involved in the business, customers of the business are involved, but partners are committed. Customers will jump ship when there is a better deal somewhere else. Employees will abandon ship in stormy seas. But partners stick together. It is no wonder then that in the business and professional worlds, achieving the rank of partner is such a sought-after goal.

My friends, you and I are privileged to be partners in the greatest of all ventures—the kingdom of God. The Scripture before us today speaks of our partnership in the gospel. It is indeed about commitment and passion. It is a partnership from the gospel and for the gospel.

**Theme: Partnership In the Gospel**

- 1. Sharing in the blessings of the gospel**
- 2. Sharing the gospel with others**

### **1. Sharing in the blessings of the gospel**

A partnership in the gospel was a thrill to the apostle Paul. It brought him joy. He wrote of it in his letter to the Christians in the city of Philippi. The letter to the Philippians has long been called “the Epistle of Joy.” That is evident in the apostle's opening words: **“I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel.”**

Here is a prime example of the difference between joy and happiness. Happiness depends on circumstances. Joy is a blessing that flows from the gifts of God. The apostle Paul was not in happy circumstances. He wrote this letter while imprisoned in Rome under what we would call “house arrest.” Today, courts enforce “house arrest” by attaching electronic monitors on the wrist or ankle of prisoners. Lacking such technology, the Romans simply chained the prisoner to a Roman soldier 24/7. Can you imagine what that would be like? Granted, this was perhaps better than being in a dungeon. But those Roman soldiers could be surly and sadistic. “House arrest” was not something to desire. Yet Paul writes with joy and thanksgiving.

Such joy shines forth in his memories. He could have said, “Oh, I remember Philippi alright. I remember we could hardly find any religious people there at all. And then there was that demon-possessed slave girl who harassed us. I remember how the townspeople arrested us, stripped and beat us, put us in chains and threw us into the dark and dirty dungeon. Oh, yes, I remember Philippi!”

But no. Paul's thoughts were, "I remember Lydia and how she and all her household became Christians. She then insisted we stay at her house. I remember casting a demon out of a slave girl and seeing her set free. I remember praying and singing hymns with Silas, while the other prisoners listened. I remember the Philippian jailer and his family, and all those other people who are now followers of Jesus. And when I remember, I thank God for you!" The apostle recognized the hand of God in his gospel ministry.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, what comes to mind when we think of one another? Do we carry around in our memory bank the person or persons who vehemently disagreed with us in a meeting? Do we remember with some smug satisfaction the dreadful sin into which someone fell, even though they should have known better? Is our opinion of someone framed by the remembrance of how they failed to carry through on their commitment? When we think of our "Rooted in Christ" Sunday, is our view, "They must want something from us again"? Those kinds of memories and attitudes will tear apart a congregation and synod.

What a different atmosphere pervades our family of believers when we remember the partnership in the gospel with which God has blessed us! We all are on equal standing before the Lord—sinners in need of forgiveness; sinners forgiven by the grace of God in Jesus; sinners forgiven of our own dreadful sins, and our less than charitable thoughts toward others. We believe in the same Savior; we live in the same peace and forgiveness; we possess the same hope of heaven. We each have a share in the blessings of the gospel, and we share those blessings together. That is a partnership in the gospel!

What joy we have, then, when we gather together for worship and encourage one another and are encouraged by one another! How we cherish "proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes" together with those with whom we come to the Lord's Communion Table. What excitement as we band together here, and with our brothers and sisters in the Wisconsin Synod, to do the work of the Lord's kingdom.

This partnership in the gospel has come to us from God. Paul writes, "**...being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you...**" This *good work* of which the apostle speaks is God's saving activity in us. Our partnership in the gospel—that is, our faith in Jesus by which we have a share in forgiveness and salvation—is all God's doing. And he has accomplished it with the gospel. As we confess in the explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel..." The same gospel the apostle Paul proclaimed to the jailer of Philippi—"Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved"—God has used through his Word and sacrament in our midst to bring us to faith in Jesus and together in fellowship with one another.

With that same gospel God will continue to bless us. To finish the Apostle Paul's statement, "**Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**"

Many a Christian has been haunted by the fear of losing one's faith. How can we last until eternity dawns? How can we be sure we will not let go of our faith and end up losing the salvation we have in Jesus and are enjoying today?

It was a cold winter day and the sidewalks were covered with ice. Little Bobby and his father were on their way to church. It was the first time the little three-year-old was wearing his new overcoat in which there were deep pockets. As the two of them approached a slippery spot, the father extended his hand to the youngster and said, "You'd better let me hold your hand." But Bobby had his hands tucked down deep into those pockets and he kept them there...until he slipped and fell. Somewhat humbled by this experience he raised himself and said, "Okay, Daddy, I'll hold your hand." And he reached up and took his father's hand with the feeble grasp of a three-year-old.

Soon they came to another slippery spot—and down the boy went again. His tiny fingers had not been able to grip his father's hand with sufficient strength to insure against his fall. Once more the child picked himself up and the two resumed their walk. But after a moment's reflection Bobby looked up into his father's face and said with childlike confidence, "Daddy, *you* hold my hand." And as they went safely on their way and ultimately reached their destination, it was the father's hand that upheld the young boy and preserved him from further falls—not the boy's grip on the father's hand, but the father's grip on his.

In the same way, our faith is not a matter of us holding onto God. It is a matter of God holding onto us. And we have the promise he will do so. **“Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”**

It is important to realize that, as in the giving of our faith, so in the keeping of our faith has God chosen to use his gospel in Word and sacrament. God did not reach down from heaven and by an act of his omnipotent hand sort of put us in a salvation “deep freeze,” reserved for glory on the Day of Judgment. Rather, God uses his Word to hold onto us. It is through his gospel God brought us to faith, and it will be through his gospel that God keeps us in faith.

My friends, let us then remain close to the gospel. Let us cultivate the habit of daily meditation on God’s precious Word, be regular in church attendance, listen attentively to the Scriptures and messages, and neglect no opportunity to partake of the Lord’s Supper for the reassurance of pardon and peace that is ours in the Savior Jesus.

## 2. Sharing the gospel with others

Shall we always have the gospel in our midst to preserve us? This is where our partnership in the gospel becomes another blessing. Remember a partner is not only involved but also committed. As the apostle Paul reflected on the congregation at Philippi he was filled with joy **“because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.”**

Paul had remembered how Lydia and her household were the first ones God brought to faith through the gospel there, and then Lydia telling them, **“If you consider me a believer in the Lord come and stay at my house.”** And she persuaded them, the Bible says (Acts 16:15). From the very beginning, their partnership in the gospel provided Paul and his companions a base from which they could carry on their gospel ministry **“until now,”** Paul writes. One of the purposes for which God inspired the apostle to write this letter was to thank the Philippians for a gift they had sent him to support his ministry. In the last chapter of his letter Paul writes, **“I am amply supplied now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God”** (4:18). The gospel had blessed them and they wanted the gospel ministry to continue for others to have a share in that blessing.

Our partnership in the gospel is not only having a share in the blessings of the gospel, but also a sharing of the gospel. What a blessing it is to have partners with which we can do that! Through our common faith in Jesus we join our time and abilities and offerings to carry on the work of the gospel ministry. This is what enables us to have facilities which can serve as the base for our ministries as Lydia’s house did for Paul. This is what enables us to support called workers to lead us in worship and the proclamation of God’s Word to nurture and preserve us in faith, to have Sunday schools and teachers to assist our parents in bringing up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord, to have Bible classes to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus, and to have an outlet to give of ourselves for the Lord’s kingdom.

And what a blessing it is to have partners in the gospel beyond our congregation to support us in our gospel ministry! All of our called workers have come from within our fellowship and have trained in our synod schools to preach and teach God’s Word in all its truth and purity. Pastor Schultz, Gartner and Schneider each had years of training from our synod’s worker training schools and seminary. Mr. Torgerson, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Hayes, Mrs. Kassulke, Mrs. Ehlke and Mrs. Schumacher, our St. Luke’s called teachers at TSL attended our worker training schools. In the past 20+ years 4 members of St. Luke’s have become Pastors. 20 members have graduated from Martin Luther College and many of them are presently teaching in one of our schools. 6 students are enrolled at MLC to become future pastors or teachers – 2 are at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to become pastors. And on top of that, we have an added opportunity to bring the gospel all over the world through our offerings to the mission work coordinated by our synod.

Partnership in the gospel—it has more than a nice ring to it. It is a sharing in the blessings of the gospel with the commitment to share the gospel with others. This is something for which we can give thanks! This is something in which we can rejoice! And this is something about which we can be passionate! Amen.