

Philippians 1

Koinonia is a Greek word that most often has been translated as fellowship. It shows up in this passage in verse 5 translated as partnership. Other than its use in academia, the word fellowship seems to be most commonly used in Christian contexts.

When translated as fellowship, the word has taken on a fairly superficial meaning in our time. It brings to mind potlucks and coffee after church. It sometimes gets used as a verb...fellowshipping, which is actually kind of a pet peeve of mine.

Fellowship as we often use it does have a sense of warmth to it and it's a truly pleasant part of church life. But the Greek from which it originated, koinonia, goes much deeper.

Koinonia is a deeper union and shared commitment to one another. It's bearing one another's burdens and joining together to witness to Christ's love, first to one another and then to the world.

That's the sort of relationship Paul sees between the members of the church at Philippi and in their relationship with him.

Not all of the churches to which Paul writes get this sort of glowing treatment. The churches at Corinth and Galatia have disappointed and Paul doesn't mince any words. But the Philippians are more like his soulmates.

The Philippians were known for their generosity. The first church Paul established in what is now Europe, the Philippians supported Paul materially and spiritually throughout his journeys. And when he was in prison, they saw to his basic needs.

Paul's prayer is that their love, already flowing, would flow more and more to help bring the gospel word to reality.

Koinonia at this deeper level can take us out of our comfort zones.

At one of my other churches, a couple recently asked to share something with the congregation during worship. Before the prayers, they came up to the lectern and shared that their adult child had come out to them a few years previously as transgender.

The boy who had been baptized and confirmed there was transitioning to a young woman.

They emphasized this was the same person they had always loved. They emphasized that being transgender was not a choice. They requested that when she came to worship, she be addressed by her new name.

A few of us had known this for a while, but most did not. Many were probably shocked and a few likely very uncomfortable.

The issue of transgender people is a difficult one for many in the church. When I have preached in the past on anything about the LGBTQ community, I've mostly said perhaps the church ought not make gay and transgender people think it would be better for everyone if they were dead.

The suicide risk for gay and transgender people, especially young people, is considerably higher than for those who are not.

And it's especially high in those who are condemned by the people in their lives compared to those who are affirmed. And often, the condemnation and rejection come from the church.

But that didn't happen in this case. The outpouring of love towards this couple, and the affirmations they received regarding their daughter, were overwhelming. That is koinonia.

This is a matter of the church's witness to the gospel. Because at the heart of koinonia is love...love overflowing more and more.

We all know how divisive politics are right now. Some of what is happening politically is dehumanizing toward certain groups and honestly really ugly.

We as the church aren't called on to write public policy or pass laws. As citizens of the world and our state and nation, our faith will likely at least in part inform how we vote and how we participate in the political process.

But our main call as the community of faith is to witness to the gospel. We do that witness as a community. At the heart of the gospel is love...first, God's love for the world and Jesus' self-giving love for us.

Then, we're called to live out Jesus' commandments to love one another, love our neighbor, and even love our enemies. We witness to the gospel by showing love and koinonia to each other, and then we share that witness with the rest of the world.

In a time when the world can seem ugly and hateful, we witness to love no matter what.

In seemingly murky situations where everything seems confusing and so different than what we've always known, we can confess that we don't have all the answers. We can say, I don't really get this.

But no matter what, we can stand by what we believe...that all people are God's beloved and should be treated as such. That might be the best witness the church could have in this day and age.

And we confess that God's love has the power to transform.

Paul writes to the Philippians "the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." God is still working on us.

That might be the most hopeful thing in the whole reading. When I despair of the world situation, or my own failures, I can remember that.

We aren't expected to have it all figured out right now. Maybe figuring it out is never really our call. I think that's what my spiritual director would say.

But the more we can be transformed by God's love, the more we can love each other and those we encounter.

Then, with that transformation, we can stand, committed to the gospel, no matter what.

Paul writes this letter from prison. Paul ran afoul of Roman law and was imprisoned several times in different places. The most likely candidates for this particular episode are either Ephesus or Rome.

Prison in the Roman Empire was a brutal place. But even there, Paul is buoyed by the Philippians and their support of him.

And he is lifted up by the power of the gospel. Because even his jailers are witness to his commitment to Jesus Christ.

The gospel has power not only to keep Paul steadfast, but God is using his imprisonment to carry the gospel to the most unlikely of places. To people who Paul should have more likely considered enemies.

Paul's witness wasn't just with his words, but with his entire body and soul. He embodied the gospel with his faith and hope, even while he was in a seemingly hopeless situation.

That witness inspired those around him, whether Christian or not.

The gospel has true power to change lives. That gospel can best change lives when we, as Jesus' followers, embody the gospel. When our actions show how the gospel plays out in love.

When we welcome into koinonia those who we might not believe fit.

When we practice koinonia with someone whose political views are the polar opposite of ours.

When we educate ourselves on how some of our social systems and policies hurt vulnerable people.

It can be hard to trust that this gospel of love is enough. I know I'm too often guilty of feeling like I have to change people's minds...change their hearts. But I'm having to face the fact that it's not my call.

My call is to love. To proclaim Christ's love and embody that love. To let Christ's love overflow. And then trust its power. To trust that transformation is the work of the gospel, not just through me as an individual, but through us as a community.

I'm called to humility rather than the certainty that I'm right.

In the end, what I'm called to is love, no matter what that looks like and no matter who it is.

I'm called to trust that God is still working in me...in us as a community...and that through us, the love of Jesus will overflow, more and more, to transform the world.