

Sermon, May 10, 2026, Bethlehem and Zion Lutheran Churches

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Text: Philippians 1:1-18a

If you were writing a letter in 50 AD, you took a little more time to say “Hello” than we typically do today. A bit more than “What’s up?” or “I hope this email finds you well.”

Paul, gives us many examples of the vibe back then. He opens his letter to the Colossians like this: “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colosse: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Or to Timothy: “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the commandment of God our Savior and the Lord Jesus Christ, our hope, to Timothy, a true son in the faith: grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.”

If this was an email, it would take ten minutes to get to the subject line.

In this Sunday’s reading, to the Philippians, there are two verses of greeting:

“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Then he continues on with nearly ten verses that can be summarized as “You guys ROCK!”

In Paul’s eyes, they DID rock.

Often Paul’s letters - to Corinthians, Colossians, Romans, and all of the other churches that he help to found around the Mediterranean- start with his kind of ornate greeting, but eventually get to “You guys are doing it all wrong!”

The church in Philippi is doing it RIGHT in Paul’s eyes, the way things SHOULD be done: good worship, good prayer, good practice, and good community relations. And he does not hold back his praise, which starts with this week’s reading and will continue next Sunday in chapter two of this letter.

Just as Paul wrote letter after letter to the early Christian congregations informing them of various opportunities for improvement, it is easy for me, and I imagine for you, to find fault in others - to be critical in our minds, if not aloud.

This can be at home, in our workplaces, and in our church.

Like Paul, we can find fault with other Christians. The multiple millennia of church history has a wide-ranging list of terrible things enacted in the name of God, or at least with the blessing of the church.

Crusaders in the Middle Ages and Klansmen in the 20th Century American South come to mind as self-appointed warriors advancing behind the cross of Christ.

Our country's has leaders who misquote the Bible, pick fights with the Pope, and post videos online of immigrants being arrested with the caption "Blessed are the peacemakers." That doesn't particularly mesh with my brand of Christianity, but that's THEIR way of following the teachings of Jesus.

There are Lutheran denominations that do not regard women (and the mothers that we celebrate today) in the same light as men, and do not allow women to serve as pastors or in leadership roles. They follow their interpretation of Paul's letters, and I am sure that they imagine that if Paul was writing an epistle addressed to THEM, they would be getting a nod of approval from him.

We all have our own vision of "doing it right" and doing it all wrong. And Paul's interpretation of his vision of Jesus does not always mesh with my own vision of the Jesus of the gospels.

Yes, it is an easy reflex for me to be as judgmental and disapproving as Paul was in many of his letters. But isn't it better to be the Paul we find HERE in the epistle to the Philippi? He is finding the good and telling his brothers and sisters in Christ: "You're doing great!" It is certainly more Christ-like.

In our congregation, in our church, in our community, on our planet, my vision of Jesus commands me to find common ground when we can, and find the good in others.

Let us give praise when we can find others doing things...right... (in our opinion.)

While we may see Jesus, and act upon the gospels in differing ways, the foundation of the gospels, seen through multiple, differing lenses throughout history is, for all of us, our guide, our shield, and our comfort.

I personally find my greatest union with all of our Christian brothers and sisters when we take Communion.

The ritual that joins us with Christ by taking his blood and his flesh for his memory has been practiced all Christians since Paul's time. It retained its power for me even during the pandemic, when the wine and bread were replaced by juice and any cracker found in the cupboard, blessed by a pastor in another county.

While the "communion" is with Jesus, as we gather at the altar for the Eucharist, my mind reaches out to the millions of people all around the planet who are also taking Communion, throughout the day on that Sunday, many, maybe, even at that exact moment.

And the communion also joins us to all of the others who have taken Communion in the past, the wine and the bread) taken by St. Paul of Tarsus, Martin Luther, St. Francis of Assisi, Joan of Arc, Martin Luther King Jr. , Mother Theresa, Pope Leo, and even Pete Hegseth.

When we take Communion, the span of our Christianity embraces the whole globe, reaches into the past, and ideally spreads into a long future ahead. The ritual, and the power behind it, reaches out to all of our sisters and brothers...and today, especially, our mothers.

Next week when Pastor Kris rotates back to our congregations to lead worship and offer Communion, embrace the greater congregation of the planet, and reach into the past and future...to those whose theology may be different than yours, and to those whose vision of Jesus resonates with yours.

As we join together in this common ritual, around the world, into the past and out the the future, we can all say: Brothers and sisters: You're doing great!

Amen

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