

Strange Places for Encouragement and Joy

Ps 91:9-16 & Philemon 1:4-7 (Text 1:7)
436, 84, 422, 78

*I have received much encouragement and joy from your love,
because the hearts of the saints
have been refreshed through you, my brother.
(Philemon 1:7)*

Pam Wong, our clerk of Session here at Brentwood,
serves on the congregational visitation committee
of the Presbytery of Westminster.

[a short briefing on Presbyterian politics,
just before our federal election]

At Bible study on Friday night,
she was telling us about a conversation that took place
at a recent committee meeting.

Visitation teams from the presbytery meet with congregations,
on average, about every three years.

One of the questions they ask
is whether the congregation has a vision and mission statement
and how that vision and mission are being lived out.

They see that kind of focus and following
as crucial to congregational flourishing.

For me, such statements need to encourage people
with the joy emerges through the life of the congregation
as it explores and exemplified the love of God
revealed for us in the work and witness of Jesus Christ.

They need to be short – one side of a t-shirt in big font,
not two sides of a night-shirt in small font.

They need to be in words the congregation has chosen and own.

They need to be actively used in the life of the congregation,
being visible on a weekly basis,
guiding the governance of the congregation,
providing clear criteria for designing mission,
being the framework for setting budgets,
inspiring people to give generously to ensure a viable future,

both on a weekly basis and in their wills.

Pam was able to say that we have a good one
that is working well here at Brentwood.

It's on the front of your bulletins every Sunday:

*Nourishing souls to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ
through
worship, learning, fellowship, and service*

It's short. It's clear.
It's says a lot about who we are in Christ.
It's memorable. It's inviting.

It emerged from about 6 months of conversations
that began in the fall six years ago.
We explored what this congregation valued about this church.
We looked at what this church was doing to deliver that value.
We discussed what was getting in the way
of that value being delivered even better.
We drafted and redrafted and refined and tested
the wording over several weeks.
The statement itself was nourished over time
so we could flourish over a much longer time.

You will have an opportunity within the next couple of weeks
to use this vision and mission statement
as the basic criteria in an evaluation of my ministry here.
My appointment by the presbytery to minister with you
has to be renewed every year.
So, Session at its meeting today will develop a survey
to get your views on how I've been doing
and what improvements you'd like to see.
It's really important to give us your input on these questions.
It helps us figure out the best ways forward
In nourishing souls to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.
What do you appreciate about what we are doing
in worship, learning, fellowship, and service,
and how can we improve that.

I'm don't imagine that Philemon's church had a vision and mission statement.

But I do think, with Paul's help, they were pretty focused
on the paths they should follow to be faithful to Jesus Christ.

That's what the church is all about –
work and witness that is faithful to Jesus Christ.
It's about nourishing souls to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ
through worship, learning, fellowship, and service.
I think those words that we developed and live by
capture well the essence of the Pauline churches
in their faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

As our text this morning highlights,
faithfulness to that vision and mission
brings encouragement and joy that is expressed
through love that is grounded in God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

That happens not just here in church,
but in everything we do throughout the week.
In this community, we are nourished
to flourish in the world in everything we do.

With Paul as our example,
we can stay resilient in this vision and mission
in strange places.

Paul is in jail when he writes this letter, probably in Ephesus,
but he is still filled with joy and offers encouragement
because of what the gift that God's love in Christ has done for him.

I've never been in prison as a prisoner.

My most memorable visit to a prison
was to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's cell in the Flossenburg concentration camp –
narrow, cramped, depressing, discouraging, and deeply saddening.

Yet Bonhoeffer, like Paul, wrote about faithfully following Jesus
in ways that have brought encouragement and joy
to generations of future Christians,
in ways that reminded hearers and readers
that there is nothing in all creation that can separate us
from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The strangeness of the place where faith flourishes,
be it a prison cell in Ephesus or Flossenburg, in Birmingham or Robben Island,
in a small house church in Colossae,
in a small congregation in Burnaby,
is not the determining factor for Paul.

The grace of Jesus Christ as a gift nothing can destroy -
that is the determining factor.

The strangeness of the place is simply the context.
The encouragement and joy of the gift of God's love is the content.
Nothing in all creation can separate us from that gift.