

So ... could you feel the love just now when Julie read from Paul's letter to the Philippians? Because between Paul and the church at Philippi it is an absolute love fest. ... First of all, a little backstory: Philippi was a city in ancient Macedonia, what is now northern Greece. And the Apostle Paul—in spite of major-league harassment from local authorities--started a congregation there, his first in Europe. ... But at the time Paul wrote this letter, he was imprisoned--probably in Rome, maybe in Ephesus. And, by the way, Paul often ended up in prison for his preaching, because in his moment the Gospel was still subversive before it later got co-opted by Empire. And while he's been in prison, these folks in Philippi have been nothing but supportive: spiritually, materially, every way supportive. So, no wonder Paul is so grateful for them [1:3-5]. And besides their support in his time of need, they are just an all-around great congregation ... not perfect, mind you (no doubt, they have their occasional kerfuffle), but all-in-all, wonderful folks. Generous givers. They're friendly, welcoming. Engaged in justice. Their annual meeting is full of joy and celebration. They've never once argued about carpet color for the sanctuary. You know what I'm talking about? Great folks. So, again, no wonder Paul is so full of gratitude. [3].

Oh, yeah, the fine, fine Philippians. I mean, they are certainly nothing like that cantankerous bunch in Corinth. Have you heard about what's going on with those people? Incredible! The church in Corinth, Greece (roughly 200 miles south of Philippi) is maybe 60 members. It's barely five years old, but already it's split into factions like you can't believe: "We belong to Peter and you don't." "Oh, yeah, we belong to Apollos and you don't." "Oh, yeah, we belong to Paul and you don't." "Oh, yeah, we belong to Christ and you don't." ... They are fighting over everything: the value of speaking in tongues and, of course, the color of the carpet for the sanctuary -- you name it. And get this. At communion--the Eucharist--the Lord's Supper, folks are making pigs of themselves while other folks--hungry folks-- are being ignored. Some folks are even getting drunk on the communion wine. Can you believe it?

So, to state the obvious: the Corinthian church is not the Philippian church. ... Can you imagine Paul giving thanks for them? ... Ah, but he does. Listen to this [I Corinthians 1:4a]. Is he serious? ... Actually, yes, he is. Paul is absolutely serious. Let's listen to a little more of what he says [1:4 ... he then expounds at length on what that means]. Now, Paul knows all about the Corinthian community. He knows exactly how dicey things are—and he will not mince words telling them what he thinks. But—and this is huge—but he also knows there is more—way more—to them than meets the eye. In fact, he knows there is more to them than they can see in themselves. The Corinthian church may be a dysfunctional mess--they may be a lot of things--but through the sheer and amazing grace of God and the power of the Spirit--they are still the very Body of Christ, he will tell them; they are still vessels that bear the very presence of the Crucified and Risen One. In spite of their struggles to be community, Jesus is still faithful to his promise to be with them and in them to the end of the age, with them and in them to bind them together as beloved siblings. Cantankerous or not, they still share Christ's presence with each other, and with Paul, and indeed with all God's holy creation. The Corinthian community is still a precious gift formed by God's unshakeable grace, and that is why Paul gives thanks to God for the Corinthians in much the same way he gives thanks for the Philippians. They are cherished and holy. And Paul passionately wants them to know that for themselves.

Because if they knew--deep in their bones knew--who they really are [beloved children of God, beloved siblings in Christ] then they would be free to give up their desperate, destructive,

obsessive striving to prove themselves; then they would be free to live courageously for Christ's revolution, then they would be free to embrace the "other" as treasured sibling. "Beloved Corinthians, Give it up, please! Don't you know who you already are?" is Paul's persistent plea. "Don't you know who you already are--precious, holy, beloved. Be who you are for your own sake and for the sake of God's creation."

Now, I want to be crystal clear. I did not bring up the Corinthian church because I think Advent/Hope/MCC is anything like the Corinthian community. The fact is, I think of MCC as a whole lot more like the Philippians. Really, I do. Trust me. ... It's just that Paul's ability to give thanks for the Corinthians as well as the Philippians points us to the bottom line--to the Solid Rock Bottom Line--to what is the ultimate foundation of our community: Through the sheer grace of God and the power of the Spirit, we too share the presence Christ with each other and with all creation. This community too is a precious gift formed by God's extravagant grace. Thanks be to God.

Now ... the truth is ... some days we're more grateful for the church community than other days, am I right? Paul says this in his 2nd letter to the Corinthian church (by the way, things do get better there--maybe not Philippian-level, but, still much better). Anyway, this is what Paul says: "We have this treasure (presence of Christ) in clay jars--in earthen vessels." We get the treasured gift of Jesus in, with and under ordinary creation, including ordinary people. But, some days we (including me, for sure) are so focused on the chips and the stains and the cracks of the vessels, that we can miss the treasure the vessels bear. Are you with me?

It's true, we people of MCC or whatever community you align with, all of us should try to be the best vessels for Christ we can be: the most faithful, most courageous, most hopeful, most radically embracing, most in solidarity with the forgotten, most generous vessels for Christ's movement we can be. ... Absolutely. ... But, even at our Philippian-like best, we're still going to be chipped, stained, cracked and sometimes broken. ... That is certainly true of me (take my word for it ... or ask my family). But here's the good news, incredibly good news: chipped, stained, cracked or broken though we be, we are still precious vessels because through the grace of God we still share the presence of Christ with each other and with all creation.

So, I've been living with these texts for at least a month now and here's the big question that has emerged for me: What if Paul's thanksgiving is but an intimation, a hint, a mere glimpse of God's thanksgiving for the Philippians and for the Corinthians and for us all?

In Paul's thanksgiving, is it possible to hear an echo of God declaring to us: "You are my beloved. You are precious in my sight. You hold the presence of Jesus in, with and under your very being. I give thanks always for you, always, throughout all eternity?" ... What if in Paul's thanksgiving we really did hear a hint of God's thanksgiving for us all? ... And what if we not only heard it, but believed it, trusted it? Can you imagine how freeing that would be? No need to prove ourselves. No need to wonder if we measure up. Just the freedom to be who we are.

I want to share from a favorite poem by a favorite theologian: Dietrich Bonhoeffer [short review of Bonhoeffer]. While in prison, Bonhoeffer felt this intense contradiction between the way others saw him and the way he saw himself: Others (fellow prisoners and his jailers) saw him as

calm, cheerful, courageous, filled with faith, inspiring. Meanwhile, he knew his own weakness, fears, anger, emptiness. In response to this lived contradiction he wrote this poem, “Who Am I?” and I’ll just share the end:

“Who am I? This or the other? Am I one person today, and tomorrow another? Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others, and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling? Or is something within me still like a beaten army, fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved? Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.” [“Who Am I? Letters and Papers from Prison.] Ultimately, Bonhoeffer knew who he was because of whose he was. And knowing whose he was gave him the courage to live by his convictions and even die by his convictions.

Who are you? You are God’s beloved. You are Christ’s cherished siblings. That’s who you are. Are you stars? Yes, you are. You are stars because you are eternally and unconditionally embraced. You are stars freed to shine with Christ’s radical light.

“I thank my God every time I remember you,” Paul wrote to the Philippians. ... “I give thanks to my God always for you,” Paul wrote to the Corinthians. ... And, my fellow Adventians, I do give thanks to God for you, for we share the very presence of the Crucified and Risen Lord with each other and with the universe.

Alleluia. Christ is Risen!