

## A SCATTERED ASSEMBLY

*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. I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.*

*Philippians 1: 1-11*

I grew up in a large family. And for the most part we got along well, but there was occasionally a minor skirmish between us kids that would escalate into open hostility. And my dad had a peculiar way of resolving these sibling conflicts. He wouldn't pay much heed to our arguments about who started it or who the offended party was. Being a believer in total depravity, he would assume that we were equally guilty, or at least complicit, and hold us both accountable.

So he would make us sit side-by-side on the sofa, each one of us with an arm around the other, until he was satisfied that we had declared a truce, if not negotiated a full-blown reconciliation. His theory was that by being so close to each other we would eventually realize how much we really loved each other and would be truly sorry for whatever we have done to injure or insult each other.

If you have children, or have taught children, or have been around children for more than 15 minutes you will quickly spot the flaw in that strategy.

There comes a time when the best and even most loving thing you can do is to put some distance between yourself and others.

We're having to practice what is being called social distancing now, but the circumstances are different. I'm not mad at you because you ate the cookies I was saving to eat while I watch the Three Stooges. You're not upset with me because I drafted your Barbie doll into my G.I. Joe troop. We are choosing to keep our distance from each other as a loving thing to do in order to put some breaks in the chain of transmission and keep the spread of a virus down to a minimum. As someone recently said, sometimes being a good neighbor means staying home.

And the circumstances between Paul and the church in Philippi are different, too. Paul was unable to be with his dear friends because he was in prison or at least under house arrest. And he is writing as a single person to a body that can still gather in his absence.

But here we are. And there you are. We would love to be near each other, but for a while we need to be apart.

The writer of the Book of Hebrews admonishes us not to neglect our gathering together. Throughout the New Testament, the word most often translated church is *ekklesia*, which is a Greek term for an assembly. The church is the assembly of the children of God, the

followers of Christ. In our own vision statement, we place as much importance on the gathering as we do the growing and going out to make Christ known.

So, how can we still be the church, the assembled body of Christ when we are prevented from gathering physically in one place?

In the opening part of the letter to the Philippians, Paul says he is grateful for two things. First, for the memory of the people that make up the congregation, for the sense of connection and belonging that their memory evokes. Last night a few choir members were able to meet remotely by a video chat. And even though it hasn't been all that long since we last saw each other, there was a sense of encouragement that we could still meet and see each other and laugh and then pray together. I encourage you to find ways to stay connected with others, by phone, cards, whatever way is available to you

Second, Paul tells the Philippians that he is grateful for their partnership in ministry, their shared sense of purpose. A word that Paul uses often is *koinoinia* which too often gets translated as "fellowship" but which has to do with the things we hold in common. We share our calling to follow Christ, but we also share our lives and our gifts, our worries and our grief. And those share purposes can continue even when we are apart from each other. I have been repeating something I heard a couple of weeks ago, that we don't cancel church, we just postpone our gathering together. The body of Christ still exists wherever we are. And several members of this congregation are continuing to go out to make Christ known in our community, keeping us bound together in our mission to serve the needs of others.

So, yes, it is important to gather, to embrace each other, to sing, pray, and worship together. And, yes, now that we can't, we miss it even more. But maybe we are learning more about how to be the *ekklesia*, the assembled body of Christ even when we are scattered. And the one who began a good work among us, will bring us back together again.

In the meantime, we not only share in God's grace, we share God's grace with others by whatever means we have available.

Thanks be to God.