

The Joy of Staying Connected
Pastor Shelley Cunningham

Philippians 2:14-3:1a NRSV


¹⁴Do all things without murmuring and arguing, ¹⁵so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. ¹⁶It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. ¹⁷But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you—¹⁸and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.

¹⁹I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news of you. ²⁰I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. ²¹All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. ²²But Timothy's worth you know, how like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. ²³I hope therefore to send him as soon as I see how things go with me; ²⁴and I trust in the Lord that I will also come soon. ²⁵Still, I think it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus—my brother and co-worker and fellow soldier, your messenger and minister to my need; ²⁶for he has been longing for all of you, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. ²⁷He was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one sorrow after another. ²⁸I am the more eager to send him, therefore, in order that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. ²⁹Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honor such people, ³⁰because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me.

¹Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord.

About 7 years ago, Al Nixon decided to start watching the sunrise. Al lives in St. Petersburg, Fla. Not far from his office is a park bench that overlooks the waterfront. Soaking in the pinky-orange glow as the day began gave him a deep feeling of inner peace. So each morning, he'd rise before dawn, put a fedora on his head, and head down to spend an hour or so in silence, listening to the waves and enjoying the view.

One morning a woman approached him. *You don't know me*, she said. *But every day when I see you sitting here, somehow it makes me feel like the day is going to be ok. Thank you for being there.* A light bulb went on for Al. *I'm not just here on this bench for me. I need*

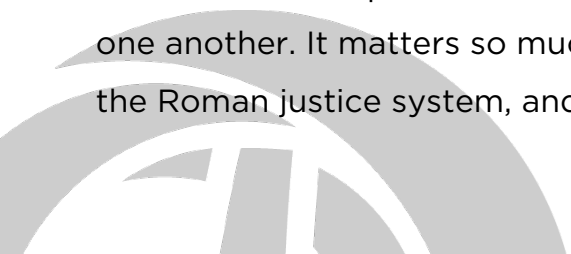


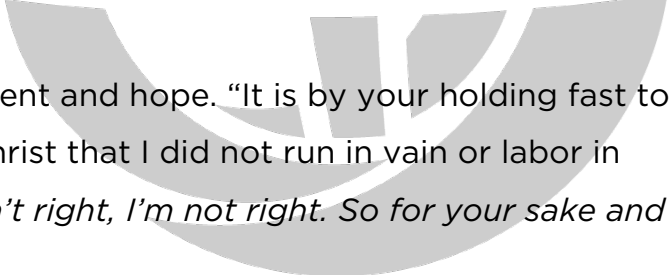
to pay attention to the people around me. Instead of staring straight ahead at the waterfront, he started making eye contact, smiling at people, striking up conversations, listening without judgment. And guess what? People paid attention back. Most passers-by would just wave. Some would chit-chat a minute or two. But on occasion, they'd rest on the bench next to him. They'd share little bits about themselves. Ask for advice. Tell him about their families. Sometimes they'd just sit in silence, to feel for a little while that they weren't alone. Al's morning routine has become more of a holy ritual. After six years and countless new friendships, he's become known as "Mayor Sunshine" in that corner of St. Pete. Al didn't set out to transform a community. But the light that shines on that park bench isn't just from the sunrise.

"It is not good for human beings to be alone," God declared in Genesis. And so God created a companion for the first person, a partner to share the load, to work and laugh and cry with. From there grew tribes, villages, churches. Through them the connections we make with others give our lives meaning and richness and depth and joy.

One of the things that made this past year so difficult was being apart from the people we care about most – the friends and family and colleagues who share our days. At some point or another most of us had to develop new ways to stay close – family group texts, or driveway visits, or Zoom game night. Think for a minute: What's one way you stayed connected with your people over the past 18 months? And can you imagine how much harder life would have been without those things?

From his prison confinement, we read in Paul's letter to the Philippians just how important it is to care for those relationships. Staying connected keeps them connected. Before you say, "duh," think about that: when you are connected with another, you can't separate their experience, their feelings, their goals. Even if I am not with you, Paul is saying, we are partners – partners in sharing the love and good news of Jesus. Partners in suffering and partners in joy. He writes of how his heart is moved to give thanks for their care, their gifts of food and money that lift his spirits and maintain his health. He writes of how it grieves him to learn of squabbles in the community, and how he is touched by their concern for one another. It matters so much to Paul that despite his uncertain future at the hands of the Roman justice system, and his desire to be united with Christ in death, he takes the





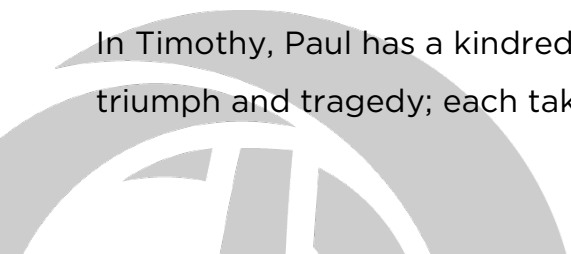
time to scribble out these words of encouragement and hope. “It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain,” Paul writes. In other words, *when you aren’t right, I’m not right. So for your sake and mine, do your best to get it right.*


Paul doesn’t sugar-coat what it means to live like Christ. Christ-followers are to think first of others. Be humble. Don’t argue. Be of one mind – by which he means be united, not uniform. They need each other. And they need to be aware of how the world sees them. If you’re fighting, or being self-righteous or anxious or rude, you don’t reflect the love of Jesus. And without that love, you won’t find joy.

That’s hard, friends. It’s hard because after a year and a half of living on high alert, most of us are worn pretty thin. Our capacity for compassion has been depleted. Even things that we think should make us happy, like going to Thursdays Downtown or getting together with friends, often don’t provide a lasting boost. Sometimes all it takes is a few minutes listening to the news to wipe out any good energy you may have banked and send you spiraling downward. Social psychologist Amy Cuddy of the Harvard Business School calls this ‘pandemic flux syndrome.’ It’s not helped by the current culture where people seem to feel permission to be the worst version of themselves – taking offense, or going on the offense. From school board meetings to social media, we are tearing each other down, not building one another up. And it is making finding the joy of staying connected extremely difficult.

I wonder if Paul felt that too. It couldn’t have been easy for him. Even though as a Roman citizen, Paul’s time in prison was probably more like house arrest than torture in a jail cell, he still was living with uncertainty. He cared deeply for the people he was writing to. He wanted desperately to know their little community of faith was going to make it. But he couldn’t predict his own fate, let alone theirs.

And yet, Paul found strength and encouragement from staying connected through letters and visits. We heard about two of those visitors in the part of Philippians we read today. In Timothy, Paul has a kindred spirit. Timothy and Paul have been together through triumph and tragedy; each takes strength from the steadfast faith of the other. Paul can





find joy knowing that if something happens to him, his work and the mission of the gospel will carry on through his friend.

In Epaphroditus, Paul finds joy by connecting with someone really different. Whereas Paul and Timothy have a long history, Epaphroditus was probably a relatively new person in Paul's life. His name - a variation of the Greek goddess Aphroditie - is a clue that he was probably a Gentile convert, He may have been eager to visit Paul and prove his devotion to Christ, but it remained to be seen if his faith was seeded in good soil.

I love that Paul holds up how much each of these two men have meant to him. Despite their differences they each offer the comfort and support that blesses Paul and bears witness to their community. They each matter.

Friends, if we're going to come out of pandemic flux syndrome and find the joy of staying connected, we need both of these types of people. So who's your Timothy - someone you can count on to pray for you, build up your faith, and who builds up your faith and helps you feel closer to Jesus? And who's your Epaphroditus - someone who offers you a fresh perspective, a chance to mentor and be surprised and give you hope for the future?

But it's not just us as individual believers who need Timothy's, and we need Epaphrodituses. The church needs them too. We need good and faithful servants whose witness and care has built and sustained this place through years of Bible studies and ZWELCA circles and Sunday School classes and funeral lunches. And we need people who have little to no experience with organized religion but who hear about the deep and wide love of Jesus and who long to be a part of a community where Christ's grace and acceptance are evident. We need each other. will be changed by each other.

But more than that, we need Jesus, who offers us the patience and grace we need to be able to face whatever lies ahead, with whomever we encounter on the journey. Whether it's watching the sunrise on a park bench, or connecting with distant family over Zoom, or bravely going deeper by being vulnerable, may that patience and grace surround you - so that you can find the joy that comes from staying connected. We will make it. We can do this. Because we are on the journey with the one who connects us all. Amen.

