

Faith Mennonite Church
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Pressing on...standing firm...in partial time
1 Corinthians 13; Philippians 3:13b-21

Two weeks ago about a dozen people gathered in Rudy Okerlund's home one evening to begin an informal conversation and a gathering of wisdom about who we are as Faith Mennonite Church. Who do we want to be and how do we want to express ourselves and the work of Christ within us here in this place in this time and as we move into the future?

As we completed the sentence "Faith Mennonite Church is a place where I..." a number of people emphasized the importance of the church—this church—in helping to keep them grounded in their faith and identity as a Christian. We come for inspiration: to be reminded that we are part of a community that goes out to be "salt and light" in the world each week. Although we might feel somewhat alone or overwhelmed by the challenges that our interactions and service to home, workplace, neighborhood, and school bring to us on a daily basis, coming together weekly reminds us that we are connected not just to one another, but to the Spirit who gives us life and power.

In the 3rd chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians, Paul used an athletic image to describe this process: we strain forward, pressing on toward a goal. Paul describes our Christian life as a constant maturing process. As runners continually seek for a slightly better time, so the followers of Christ seek to more fully live into his teachings and his example. A marathon runner will only compete again if he or she continues to run and condition. One cannot say "I *am* a marathon runner" if I only ran one race and don't anticipate any future competitions. So it is in our Christian lives. We can't speak with integrity of following Christ if we only refer to past experiences or the legacy of our family. Like the runner whose eye is on the finish tape, we as Christ-followers have our eyes on the fullness of God's kingdom and all that means for interpersonal relationships and the physical and social wellbeing of all. Paul speaks of this as a "citizenship in heaven." We don't know exactly how Paul envisioned heaven. The Christian tradition has sometimes fallen into the trap of envisioning an other-worldly place of clouds and angels playing harps. But when Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven, he seemed to envision something that begins in the here and now—a community of healing, of reconciliation, and peace. An abundant feast with food aplenty for everyone, rich and poor. And in John's vision in the final book of Revelation we see a new heaven and a new earth. Like the resurrected body of Jesus, which bore a continuity with his body before death, which bore the wound marks of his death, we await heaven that is the fullness—and beyond fullness—of the best of what we know in creation and in relationships. And if that is our prize, our goal, we move toward it with anticipation and practice.

The late commentator William Barclay wrote that when Paul wrote about citizenship, the persons in Philippi would have had a very distinct picture of what that meant. Philippi was a Roman colony. Rome built these strategic military centers throughout the empire. The citizens of these colonies were largely retired soldiers, who after serving years were granted full citizenship. "The great characteristic of these colonies was that, wherever they were, they remained fragments of Rome. Roman dress was worn; Roman magistrates governed; the Latin tongue was spoken; Roman justice was administered; Roman morals were observed. Even in the ends of the earth they remained unshakably Roman. Paul says to the Philippians, 'Just as the Roman colonists never forget that they belong to Rome, you must never forget that you are citizens of heaven [God's kingdom]; and your conduct must match your citizenship.'"¹

Now Paul says something else that rings a bit presumptuous and that few of us feel confident to say: "join in imitating me." But he speaks not only of himself. "Observe those who live according to the example you have in us." It's easy to think that one has to be impeccable, perfect in every way, to invite

¹ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*. The Daily Study Bible Series. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975, 69].

others to follow or imitate. But perhaps if we return to the athletic image, we might better interpret Paul's thinking as "come condition with us." Running with others keeps us incentivized. If we know others are waiting and expecting us, we get out and go even if we don't feel like it. And running (or playing any sport or musical instrument) with someone or others who not necessarily perfect, but are just a notch better than us, prompts us to do even better ourselves.

Each of Paul's letters is a mix of encouragement and exhortation. Philippians is usually considered the most encouraging of all, while the first letter to the Corinthians is much more exhortation and correction.

The "love chapter" that the readers theater group read for us this morning is an exception in the letter: it is pure encouragement, pure eyes on the prize, surrounded by chapters before and after that addressed troubling and conflictive issues. In most of the letter Paul is addressing questions of what we might call "practical theology"—divisions in the church caused by speaking in tongues or spiritual languages, eating foods that had been offered as a sacrifice in a non-Christian religious ceremony, class-based discrimination in the community, and sexual indiscretion. The church in Corinth had major issues, and although Paul tries to address each issue individually, it's as if he takes a breath, a pause in the middle and says: Hey, folks, all of these issues come down to one thing: love. If we're arguing, if we're trying to come out on top and be right, if we take a my-way-or-the-highway attitude, we have taken our eyes off of the goal.

"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

Here in the letter to the Corinthians, instead of an athletic metaphor, Paul speaks in terms of human development. As children we don't understand everything and we make mistakes, which are a natural part of growing up. But as we mature, even as we recognize that we still do not understand fully, we grow into new behaviors and attitudes: habits of love. We will always live in "partial time" because we will always only comprehend in a partial way, no matter how long we live. But, Paul says, we seek to know and love more fully because we are already fully known and fully loved by God.

Like a runner who betters his or her time by running with the best, we grow in love by drawing nearer to God and to those whom we notice have gained maturity in love. We draw nearer to God through meditation on scripture alone and with others, through prayer, and through extending grace and forgiveness to those around us, practicing love. And we draw nearer to God as we draw nearer to those around us who exude love, who demonstrate love. When love becomes our goal, God will strengthen us for the task.

This week families and groups of friends will be gathering to celebrate Thanksgiving. Feasts such as this have the potential for being a foretaste of the feast of heaven—God's ultimate gathering of love. But they also have the potential for pain and conflict. There's often at least one person at such gatherings who pushes our buttons—and not our love buttons! If that is a situation you anticipate, consider it a work-out, a chance to put into practice the call to love with patience and endurance.

"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love." Keep your eyes on the prize. With God's help you can do it!