

*Texts: Philippians 1:1-18a; Luke 9:46-48*

*Subject: Partnership in the Gospel*

*Theme: Keep Speaking*

*Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 22, 2022; Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven, and our risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Thanks to Pastor Matt for sharing the good news last week in my absence. I was at a board meeting in Chicago with Lutheran Men in Mission, a ministry whose vision is “for every man to be a bold and daring follower of Christ.” They help to create resources, lead retreats, workshops and speaker events, to proclaim God’s grace and forgiveness, especially to men who have not been connected to a faith community for one reason or another. It’s a ministry I’ve been a part of for more than a dozen years, and it was good to get together in person after being on Zoom for over two years. We talked about important things like event planning and fundraising, but the passion that drive these men and mentors, is to share their faith, to walk together with guys who are facing challenges, who need to know there are ones who will come along side them and speak a word of hope for them, and point them to God’s love in Jesus Christ. It’s powerful stuff. During the pandemic, they connected with ministry groups all over the country, with online gatherings, discipleship groups and Book studies, online worship, and daily devotions. They are men passionate about staying connected to Christ in their lives, and staying connected to one another in the process. Through the years I’ve built relationships with these men who have invested in me, and who I know will be praying for me, for my family, and will be there for me always.

It’s these kind of warm feelings Paul shares with the community at Philippi - they’re close to him, ones he has relied on in the past, ones who support him and the

ministry. They're not quite a church in the ways that we might think of it. He uses the terms saints and bishops and deacons, and those sound like titles we have as part of our organized church body. In Paul's time, these were terms used for anyone who had a role in keeping up the temples to various gods, the places used for sacrifices and worship. They were inclusive of the people themselves who had a stake in the temple practice. So by using these titles, Paul is noting a special connection between himself and the people of the faith community and their shared commitment to Christ.

Today and over the next couple of weeks we'll hear from the apostle Paul and the letter to the Philippians, which was one of Paul's later writings, coming nearly 30 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. This community to which he writes is special to him. They all are, but to this community he writes with particular love and joy. It's the same church we heard about in Acts 16, with Lydia and others who meant so much to Paul. Remember we heard about the slave girl who was shouting out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God" - a title that Paul now uses as he greets his friends while writing from inside a prison, maybe in Ephesus, maybe in Rome. Paul and his partner in ministry Timothy are locked up again. And it's important to note that this was no stay at the Ritz-Carlton. The prison itself might just have been a literal hole in the wall, where Paul and others might be held a short time, and without a connection to the community outside, where people would starve to death. They didn't have a mess hall, no bunk beds or blankets, nothing at all. They relied on the surrounding community of believers to provide what was needed for them to survive.

Paul was not alone in his sufferings in prison. He had Timothy, his missionary partner, he had the community of the faithful to support him, and he had Jesus. He

shared the love of God with other prisoners, and even the guards, as we heard just a couple weeks ago. Paul prayed for his church friends and longed to be with them again.

When we gather for meetings, on Zoom and in person, our Lutheran Men in Mission board with always end with prayer requests, and often, as you might imagine, I get to be the designated praying one. It comes with the territory, I guess. They will lift up names of people who I have never met: members of their churches, their children and spouses, pastors, friends of friends who were going through different struggles - they all get named before God as we finish our evening in prayer together. As I listen, I jot down their names and struggles so that I will be able to mention them the closing prayer, and often it's a long list. But isn't that amazing to know that we are connected to churches across the nation, and even across the world?

We proclaim Christ crucified and risen. I expect just about any church you walk into on a Sunday morning can say the same. They might use different words. Maybe they'll say they're a "Bible believing church," or a "family church," or a ministry of some worldwide missionary group. They might call themselves by different names, or dress differently, or sing different hymns, but we are all one in Christ Jesus and nothing we do or say changes that. Our unity is in Jesus our Lord. Some will be more welcoming than others. Some will be more blatantly political, or judgmental, or strict, or louder or quieter than ones you're used to, but all those who gather and worship and proclaim Christ are our partners in the Gospel. It doesn't mean we'll agree on everything. That's for sure. But that's okay.

Paul wrote his letters even before what we know as the four Gospels were written down. Others have their reasons and motivations, but Paul invokes the name of

Christ for the sake of building up communities, sharing the Word of salvation and forgiveness he himself received from Jesus and through the Holy Spirit, likely being influenced in his travels by those believers he met. They might have had different motives, but they all came to believe together, and built up the community for the sake of sharing this good news with others. They passed it on.

I've seen quite a few graduations this week. So many children of friends, local college and high school students, even my dear life partner got to celebrate this milestone in person once again. None of those students who walked across a stage or turned their tassel from one side to the other did it alone. Their success was based on the hard work and support of the people around them, family members, bus drivers, coaches, mentors, teachers, friends, yes even student loan programs. All these things resulted in students reaching their goals, whatever they may be. But they were not alone, and you are not alone. We are in this life together for a reason, for each other.

We pass on what we have learned. We share the word that was spoken to us, and even when the world changes, when our lives get turned upside down we will keep on speaking, keep sharing our stories, keep on teaching others, and keep on telling folks the reason for the love that we share: it's because God loved us first. He loves us now and he loved you even then, when you thought you were all alone in your suffering. Paul prays for the community that he loves, like I pray for you, and you pray for me, and those ones in our lives who have lifted us up, who have invested in us pray for us, that we would continue to love one another, to share in this gospel ministry, and proclaim the love and mercy and grace of Jesus to all.

Paul keeps on speaking from prison and even claims his suffering as inspiration for those to whom he has spoken. They speak out with even louder voices, proclaiming Christ with “boldness and without fear.”

There’s so much in the world and in our culture that can tear us from one another and make us afraid: from restrictions on a woman’s right to decide on her own reproductive health, to gun violence and racial hatred, to fear among gay, lesbian, bisexual, or trans siblings that they might not be able to have access to healthcare or the same rights as others in the community, to the fear of war and destruction, having to choose between gas and baby formula or needed prescriptions. It can feel like we just keep getting beat down and we cannot get back up.

All of God’s children of all genders and races, all abilities and sexualities have a share in this good news. Each baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection is a part of the beloved community and we are strengthened by one another. We grow from knowing one another. When one proclaims Christ, the Word is sent, and this Word does not return empty - it does what it intends, it convicts, soothes, liberates, and delivers us from bondage to selfishness, it awakens a sense of gratitude and connects us with our neighbors. This Word creates, and renews, and continues God’s necessary work of salvation in each one of us. And the one who began that work will bring it to completion. So keep speaking, keep connecting, keep believing, keep praying and trusting that God who loves us all is near to us now. Amen.