

Hillsdale First Presbyterian Church
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From (Theologically) Distanced to Deeply Connected (Phil. 1:1-11)

I was recently invited to a Mardi-Gras-themed Zoom celebration. As I had little inclination to stare into my computer camera and pretend to have fun with people I do not know, I chose to do something else with my time. Hold the party in person with a buffet, and I might be there. Otherwise, I am fine to eat potato chips at home without an audience. Over the course of the last year, we have become familiar with the concept of social distancing. We have tolerated plastic partitions at restaurants. We have stood on the markers at the grocery store check-out line. We have worried if we offended someone by standing too close for their comfort or trying to shake their hand. I think we should be wise and discerning when it comes to things like public health. Wash your hands. Don't sneeze on your neighbors. Stay home if you are sick. Great. These have always struck me as reasonable ideas. In times of emergency, take unusual precautions like face coverings if necessary. Yet I must draw the line somewhere, and the place I think we should draw the line involves the basic demands of human nature. We need to have relationships with other people. We need to see people. We need to have real connection. Not all of us are the same, of course. The desire for face-to-face relationship varies from person to person due to personality differences. Yet, we all need them sometimes. As a pastor, I worry over the consequences of too much technological mediation in our relationships. What are the long-term effects of too many Zoom meetings? What happens when the Christian worship service is reduced to just one more piece of media to be consumed in an expansive world of podcasts and YouTube videos? What are we losing when our social connections are managed by algorithms and marketing firms?

We need connection. Real, substantial connection with other human beings, sharing space and using our senses. And more than that, we need connection with God. We don't only have a problem of social distancing. We have a problem of theological distancing. The book of Genesis testifies to the deep connections that Adam and Eve had with one another and with God. When they disobeyed God, distance set in. Distance between each other. Distance from the creation. And distance from God. In the Old Testament, even God's

people Israel often put distance between themselves and God. One of the accusations leveled through Jeremiah the prophet was that God's people had turned their back to God and not their face (Jer. 32:33). Spiritual distance led to exile. Exile from the land. Exile from God's temple in Jerusalem. The Gentile world also had a distancing problem. Paul once remarked of the Gentiles in their pre-conversion state, "...you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). Do you hear the theological distancing and its grievous consequences? Indeed, what could be worse than having no hope and being without God?

God's word to us in the first eleven verses of Philippians is that **the distance has been overcome. God has united us to himself, and God has knit back together our relationships with one another.** Connection overcomes distance. This letter was written while Paul was in prison. The church at Philippi was a church with which Paul had intimate fellowship, having begun it in his second missionary journey (you can read about it in Acts 16). Not only did they respond to the good news about Jesus, but they had joined Paul in support of his ministry. This first passage can be divided into two sections: the salutation and greeting in vv. 1-2 and the thanksgiving in vv. 3-11. In both sections, we see evidence of connection in place of distance. We have been connected to God. We have been connected to one another.

Deeply connected to God. The traditional salutation tells us about who wrote the letter and who received the letter. Paul and Timothy, slaves of Jesus Christ, are named as the senders of the letter, and the saints in Philippi are named as the recipients (more about all this in a moment). Paul then offers a word of greeting in v. 2; yet this greeting contains the reality of a divine salutation. More than words are being communicated. Grace and peace are being offered. Who are the senders of this grace and peace and who are the recipients? The senders are "God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." The recipients are simply "you" (grace and peace to you). So right here in the first two verses of this letter, in the traditional forms of a letter, we find the deep truths of the gospel. God is our Father because he has given us his Son. In Christ, we who are disconnected and distanced from God, receive grace and peace. Grace is unmerited favor from God. Peace is wholeness and restoration. Just as a letter

is sent to a recipient apart from the recipient's work, so grace and peace are sent to us from God apart from our work.

Moving on to the thanksgiving, we find more evidence of our deep connection to God. The Philippians had once been distant from God, but, at a point in time, God began a good work in them; he will see this work through in them so that they arrive safely at the day of Jesus Christ (v. 6). God does not just help his people once and then leave them on their own. Instead, he keeps helping them. He promises to not let even one of his people be lost. We would do well to stop and dwell on a very practical matter of spiritual experience. We all experience times of coldness in our life with God. It seems as if God hides his face from us. The precious truth that we must live on in those times of seeming distance, is that God is still at work. God is still present with you because God has promised to stay with you and finish what he started. In those times, we walk by faith and trust what God has told us clearly in his word. We don't give up. We knock. We seek. In due time, we have hope that God will again speak to our hearts in experiential ways. We are deeply connected to God.

Deeply connected to one another. Note that it is Paul and Timothy who send this letter. Timothy had also been converted in Paul's second missionary journey, and he had accompanied Paul to Philippi. God joined Paul and Timothy together, and he brought both workers together with the converts of this church. Within the church of Philippi, new kinds of relationships emerged. From the conversion of Lydia onward, women continued to play a significant role in the life of the church. We will especially see this aspect of the Philippian church when we read about Euodia and Syntyche in chapter four. Some of the members have also been called to be overseers and deacons. Overseers are sometimes named elders in the New Testament. They are those members set apart for the work of teaching, prayer, and shepherding. Deacons served in the practical administration of the church's life. The church has built a relationship with Paul – a relationship which he names a “fellowship in the gospel” (v. 5). This is more than a professional relationship. Paul always thanks God when he remembers them (v. 3). He makes requests for them with joy (v. 4). They are in his heart, and he sees them as “partakers with me of grace” (v. 7). He longs for them with the affection of Jesus Christ (v. 8).

It is natural then that prayer for them flows out of this deep connection. Paul's prayer is chronicled in vv. 9-11. He prays that their love will abound in knowledge and discernment. He requests that they learn how to approve excellent things and avoid blame until the day of Christ. He asks that they be filled with the fruits of righteousness which come by Jesus Christ and lead to the glory and praise of God. Paul models for us deep connection. He is affectionate even as he leads. He prays not just for surface well-being but for all kinds of spiritual blessing. The deep connection with God manifests itself in deep connection with God's people. The things which had been lost in the fall are being restored in and through Jesus Christ.

We also should cultivate affection for one another in Christ. We also must serve one another with our gifts in both formal offices and informal roles. And, if we are truly connected, we must pray for one another. I want you to pray for each other's bodies. But don't stop there. Parents, pray that your children develop a taste for excellent things. Children, pray that your parents abound in fruits of righteousness. Elders, pray that the members abound in love. Members, pray that your leaders have knowledge and discernment. We can pray these kind of prayers for one another because Jesus has re-connected us both to God in heaven and to one another.

Sometimes, we need to distance ourselves from others. It may be for health reasons. Or maybe work takes us out of town. Or maybe we need to love someone from a distance while they work on some aspect of their lives. Sometimes, we must settle for Zoom meetings and text messages. But we were made for connection. And, in Jesus, those connections which were damaged in the fall are being repaired. Our most pressing need is that, apart from grace, we stand at a distance from God. Yet, the message of the gospel is clear. God closes the gap. His grace and peace come to us in Jesus. Now, we may live in the sure and certain knowledge of his presence with us.