

First Presbyterian Church
“Engaging Faith - Gratitude”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
February 26, 2023

[Psalm 138; Philippians 1:1-11](#)

It was not a regular topic of conversation but occasionally my three brothers and I would debate which one of us was our parents’ favorite. In the end we could never come to a consensus, each of us choosing one or another of our siblings. I think this speaks highly of our parents who never seemed to let on which, if any of us, were favored over the others. The same could not be said for the Apostle Paul, however, because if you read his letters, it is clear which of the churches he founded was his favorite. And that church is the church at Philippi. We are not exactly sure why that favored status belonged to them, but that being the case, I want to use his words to the Philippian believers as my words to you on this, my final Sunday with you.

“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 want to thank you for allowing me to share the good news of Jesus Christ in word with you week after week and year after year. You have allowed me to share it in worship on Sunday mornings, in Rejoicing Spirits services, in Bible studies, in articles, in the Walk Through the Bible for children and adults, as well as in Vacation Bible Camp. I am grateful for your sharing in the Good News with me. You have allowed me to share with you in the Good News of Jesus in deed as well. You allowed us to share in your amazing work outside of the walls of this building from Alcott in Pontiac to rural villages in Kenya. I am grateful.

“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.” Cindy and I believe that there are great things to come for Everybody’s Church. This is not to minimize what we have done together over the past fourteen years. Together, in the power of the Spirit, we have created a unique, wonderful, and growing community. We have created a community in which all persons are welcomed, embraced, and encouraged to use their gifts to create a better community and world. This welcome is regardless of a person’s gender identity, skin color, language, sexual orientation, occupation, wealth, abilities, or any other way we might categorize ourselves. It is so because we profess that all human beings are beloved children of the loving and living God. What I hope we will remember is that this work did not begin with me, nor will it end with me. This work began decades ago with the hard work of individuals in this community. These foremothers and forefathers are no longer with us, yet they plowed and planted this vision for us to reap the harvest of the love it offers. They were abolitionists and advocates of women’s suffrage and ordination. They were advocates for the full inclusion of members of the LGBTQIA+ community. They were advocates for the full inclusion of persons of all abilities. We are the inheritors of a great history and tradition. And I believe that God is not done with this community yet and has great things in store for you in the days, weeks, and years ahead. I believe you will continue to be a light to the world. I am grateful.

“...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.” I want to thank you for sharing God’s grace with me and Cindy. I want to thank you for sharing the best and the most difficult of times with us. You gave us the great privilege of sharing in moments of great joy: moments of birth and baptism, moments of confirmation and graduation, moments of promotions and business success, and moments of anniversaries and successful surgeries. You also gave us the honor of sharing the most difficult of times: moments of difficult diagnoses and deaths, moments of loss and struggle, and moments of wrestling with mental and physical illnesses. There were also moments of Gospel and grace in which we know that you kept us in your prayers, through our own struggles and surgeries, and our own joys and celebrations. There were other ways that you shared as well. You shared your resources to provide for us over the past fourteen years. We pray in joy for you because of your sharing so much with us. I am grateful.

“And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full of insight to help you 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.” I want to thank you, the congregation and the session, all the sessions, since I arrived, for being permission giving and not permission withholding. One of the truisms about most churches and organizations is that they are loath to change and transform. There are people constantly saying, “We’ve never done it that way. Here is what we have always done and we need to keep doing exactly the same.” Though I may have heard some of this, what I discovered was that First Presbyterian was a place that was willing to experiment; experiment with worship, mission, fellowship, and virtually any other aspect of the life of this church. I believe you have been this kind of church because you desire to discover all knowledge and insight in order to determine what is best so that you can be the church Jesus Christ desires you to be, so that your love may overflow into the world. You have no idea how many other pastors when they hear this about our church, have said to me and to Rev. Amy and Rev. Bethany, “I wish I could serve at a place like that.” And each time that they say this, it is a reminder to me just how amazing you are...for you are the church. You are the living body of Christ. I am grateful.

Before I offer you my challenge, there are three more thank yous I want to offer. First it is to you, the folks who come here week after week, praying for Cindy and me, the world, and one another. I am grateful to you for your faithfulness.

Second, I want to thank the people I have worked with past and present on staff here. They are one of the many reasons why we are the church we are, why we are becoming the church we are becoming. These folks are faithful, talented, committed, hardworking, and just fabulous individuals. Please pray for them during this time of transition and give them all the love and support you can.

Finally, I want to thank Cindy, my rock and my informal parish associate. I could not have done this without her. She was my biggest supporter and fiercest defender. And a great editor.

My friends, we live in a hurting world. We live in a world that is looking for hope. You are that place where people can come and find love and hope, where people can find healing and grace, where people can find purpose and community. My challenge for you is to be Everybody's Church in which life and love can continue to flourish and change the world.