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 Philippians 1:1-5
 First Message
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JOYFUL SERVANTS AND BELOVED SAINTS

We begin our study this morning with a surprise guest.

Hello Brothers and Sisters:

I can't tell you how grand it is to see you again. For a long time I didn't know if I would get out of prison and make it to Philippi. But here I am. Seeing your faces once more brings me great joy. I recognize many of you, but I can tell that several of you have joined this fellowship since I was last here. Praise God. Thank you so much for your gifts while I was in prison. I have learned to be content in every situation, but let me tell you, it was nice to get some pastrami on rye and kosher pickles!

My heart has such a deep affection for you all. It has been that way since the very beginning. Lydia, remember the first day I met you. I arrived in town and there was no synagogue, so I went down to the river. Boy, was that God ordained or what! You already believed in God and just needed a gentle nudge to learn the truth about Jesus. We baptized you and your household, and instantly this church was born. You were so gracious to let us stay with you. I can still remember all that beautiful purple fabric in your basement.

Sara, you look great. I remember when God displayed his power by casting out the demon that had possessed you. Those wicked men were taking advantage of you and using you for their own personal gain. But the Lord Jesus had other ideas. He healed you and gave you a life you had never known.

Of course, it made things interesting for Silas and myself. Oh sure, the beatings hurt greatly, but they could not diminish the joy in our hearts because of what God was doing in Philippi. Joe, remember that night in the jail? Was that unbelievable or what! I had never experienced anything like that. The earth roared, the chains fell off, and the prison doors opened. That is kind of like what happens to us when we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

You were so despondent, Joe, that you were going to take your own life. But we didn't leave, and you were so amazed you wanted to know how to be saved. You and your entire household believed and were baptized in the name of Jesus. I have to tell you, Joe, that night was one of the highlights of my life, right up there with meeting the Lord on the Damascus Road. And of course, I will never forget the lamb dinner we had that night, or how we left those officials shaking in their boots when we told them we were Roman citizens.

I praise the Lord for you all and I am so delighted to see you again.

These words might well have been the apostle Paul's if he had been able to visit the church in Philippi, but he was martyred before he had the opportunity. What we do have, however, is a letter which he wrote from prison.

We are embarking on a study of Paul's epistle to the Philippians. These days on our Sunday morning slate we have Ruth gleaned in the fields of Boaz, Adam and Eve cast out of the garden, and the child Samuel soon to become a prophet in Israel, replacing Eli's wicked sons as God's voice to his people. Someone has to be in the New Testament!

Philippi is now our setting: the apostle Paul, dramatic displays of God's power, people coming to Christ, and a church that needs encouragement, just as any church needs encouragement, including our own. Paul's words are as applicable today as they were two thousand years ago. I pray that God will speak them into our hearts.

Philippi was an important Macedonian city, founded by Philip II, king of Macedon. Located in northern Greece, on a major highway, there are ruins still remaining on the site, including a church. In 42 B.C., Octavian and Mark Anthony won two major battles on the nearby plain. Octavian re-populated Philippi with Roman citizens, primarily discharged veterans, making the city a colony of Rome. We are reminded of the British Empire, where colonists maintained all the traditions of home—tea in the afternoon, cricket, etc. Philippi's inhabitants were very loyal to the emperor Nero, whom they referred to as divine "Lord" and "Savior." Christians who worshipped Jesus as Lord stood in stark contrast to the majority of people living in this Roman colony.

This is one of the apostle Paul's prison epistles, most likely written from Rome in 60-62 A.D. There are four references to his being in chains. Paul does not know if he will die or be set free, but his letter indicates that he expects to see the Philippians again. He had a very affectionate relationship with the church at Philippi, which he helped found on his second missionary journey, as recounted in Acts 16. This was the only church to help Paul with financial support. In fact, according to scholars, this letter has all the earmarks of a friendship letter.

Letter writing was an art form in the first century, something which has gone by the way with the advent of email and text messaging. Friendship was marked by giving and receiving, obligation and expressions of gratitude, mutuality and reciprocity. Imagine if you were a missionary and had led several

people to the Lord and started a church. This would certainly foster a life-long friendship. This gives you an idea of Paul's love for these people. Thus there are several very personal sections in the letter, interlaced with moral exhortations.

Philippians is one of the favorite books in the Bible. Many of you can quote some of its key verses.

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. (1:21)

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; (3:20)

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! (4:4)

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (4:6)

And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (4:7)

I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. (4:13)

And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. (4:19)

Now the opening verses of the letter.

Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. (Phil 1:1-5 NASB)

As we begin our study I want to focus on three phrases: *bond-servants of Christ Jesus*; *all the saints in Christ Jesus*; and, *I thank my God...always offering prayer with joy*.

Servants of Christ Jesus

Paul is the author, and Timothy, who would soon be visiting Philippi, his secretary, spiritual son and current companion. In eight of Paul's thirteen letters he describes himself as an apostle. But here and also in Romans and Titus he uses the word bond-servant or slave, a *doulos* of Christ Jesus.

Slaves had no status or rights in that society. They were not free; they belonged to another. The word implies abject humility and servitude—hardly a term one would desire for oneself. But in this phrase we hear an echo of the Old Testament phrase, “servant of the Lord.” This was a title of honor for special service to Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel. We find this description primarily used of Moses, but it was also used to describe Joshua, Jonah, Nehemiah, David, and the prophets. Certainly Paul viewed himself in this light—a servant of Yahweh, a slave a Christ. Notice how the apostle substitutes Christ Jesus for the personal name of God in the O.T.

The use of the word “slave” is no accident. It hints at a major theme in the letter. There were two forces at work in Philippi that concerned Paul. Present were outward tensions as the Christians in Philippi sought to live in a pagan society intent on declaring Caesar as Lord. Under Nero, persecution was on the rise and the Christians there were beginning to suffer. Paul exhorts the church to follow his example as a slave of Christ and suffer with joy (2:16-18).

There was also internal tension in the leadership of the church, specifically between two women, Euodia and Syntyche. Paul exhorts the church to follow Christ's example, to have the mind set of Jesus, to become a slave like Jesus (2:7), striving to maintain unity in the church through humility.

Would we describe ourselves as slaves of Christ Jesus? Are we so intent on serving God that we would welcome persecution for our faith, or be willing to humble ourselves to maintain unity in the body of Christ? This letter will help to sort that out both in our own lives and our corporate identity.

When we come to Christ we become a new creation. One life ends and another begins. In Christ we become sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father. That is our new identity. We are set free from the power of sin and death. However, as Paul says elsewhere, “we are not our own, we are bought with a price.” As we live in this earthly colony we are citizens of heaven, functioning as slaves or servants of Jesus Christ. This is an important decision for each one of us.

Listen to these words from Paul's letter to the Romans:

Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. (6:16-18 NASB)

Oftentimes we ourselves are at the center of our own lives. We live for ourselves, for our possessions, for our wants and desires. When we live that way we become a slave of sin. Our world becomes very small. Joy and delight decrease while frustration and lack of satisfaction increase. Our desire to be special and significant is beyond our reach. I am always reminded of Marlon Brando's line in the movie “On the Waterfront: “I coulda had class. I coulda been a contender. I coulda been somebody instead of a bum.” When we live self-centered lives we live with the unfulfilled ambition to be somebody.

Now that we are in Christ, belonging to Christ, we are no longer slaves of the world system or our fleshly desires. We are no longer slaves of our selfishness or our desire for comfort and pleasure. We do not live for ourselves but for something so much bigger. We do not live for the fleeting, temporary moment but rather for things that have eternal value. Our life becomes other-centered and our world expands to the size of God's plans and purposes.

Earlier this morning we heard from the team that just returned from a ministry in Galveston. That is being a servant of Christ. We have a doctor in our congregation who is ending his private practice so that he can spend more time doing medical mission work. That is being a servant of Christ. But we go to work each day, we live in our neighborhoods, and we attend our children's sporting events with the same mind set: we are there as servants of Christ Jesus. Paul is a slave of Christ and he will encourage us to function in the same way.

All the saints in Christ Jesus

Paul addresses his letter to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the leaders of the church, the overseers or bishops and the deacons. (The apostle talks about the character qualifications for these two offices in 1 Tim 3.)

The word "saint" means to be holy, set apart, sanctified. In the O.T., this term was used for Israel: "you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19:6). Here, Paul uses the word "saint" or "holy one" to describe believers in Jesus Christ. This became a common term for the new covenant people of God.

God had called the saints in Philippi to be his people. He had set them apart to be a contrast to the pagan society in which they lived, to confront the idols of Rome and to announce the coming of a new king to power. Here is how Peter describes believers in his first epistle:

you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Pet 2:5)

But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR GOD'S OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; (2:9)

The saints in Philippi would suffer for being God's people, but they will be encouraged to suffer with joy and not shrink back from the purposes of God, to "proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light."

We too are have been called by God to be his people. We are his saints, his holy ones, his set apart ones. As we look around the room here we might find it hard to believe that we the saints in Cupertino. We might have a hard time seeing ourselves as God's own possession, part of his people who have been set apart from the world. But we are. We are both slaves of Christ and saints of God.

We are here in our neighborhoods and in our jobs to be distinct, to confront the idols of our world, and to announce the King who has come to power through the resurrection. We are not designed to blend into our society; we are here to stand apart. Even if we suffer for his namesake, we live our lives as spiritual sacrifices pleasing to God. We do this not through

violent means, but by simply speaking the name of Jesus and proclaiming him to be our Lord.

The little word "all" is very important in this phrase. Paul is not writing to just "some" of the saints in Philippi. What he has to say applies to each and every person, even those who are in leadership, perhaps especially those who are in leadership, since there seems to be tension between two prominent women. His concern is the unity of the church in light of these current tensions. He wants everyone on board, not just those who are more spiritually minded. We will see this little word "all" repeated throughout the letter; it is very prevalent in the first eleven verses.

Not only are we individually called and set apart, we are called collectively to be the people of God, in a particular church body, in a particular location. We are not individuals attending a church service like students attending a chemistry class. We are part of the body of Christ, which is a living, dynamic organism. We are not individual cells complete within ourselves but rather cells of a body, organically joined together. The whole is much greater than the parts. What affects one person affects us all. The unity of the body is essential for how God wants to use the church.

Seeing ourselves as a vital part of a local church community means that there is a commitment to sit under God's word together, planting ourselves in local body, getting involved in relationships and conquering our fear of being known. Now this is not easy, especially in the environment in which we live, the busyness of our lives and the diversity of our congregation.

Our staff and elders strive to be aware of the "all" at PBCC. We are very aware of the different ethnic backgrounds in our body and want to be sensitive to our Asian brothers and sisters for whom English is not their first language. (Many people don't "get" my corny football illustrations.) And so a couple of our brothers are going to hold a six-week class in Mandarin, beginning on the first Sunday in May. We continually ask how we can connect and involve people in our church body, how we can foster the growth of "all."

I thank my God...always offering prayer with joy

Paul greets the church in his typical fashion, with grace and peace—grace received from Christ through the cross, which results in peace or *shalom* from the Father. But the next word we read is "thanks to my God." His first word is a word of gratitude.

In seven of Paul's letters he begins by giving a word of thanks to God. He is thankful for the faith, love, and grace in the lives of those he cares about. Here in Philippians, he is grateful that the believers there have been participants in his gospel work from the very beginning. We will look at the apostle's prayer in detail next week, but for now I want to ponder his grateful heart.

Paul is in prison. He does not know if he is going to live or die, and yet his heart bubbles over with gratitude. This

gratitude is directed to God in prayer and is combined with joy. Joy is a key word in this letter, with 16 usages. Paul obviously practiced what he wrote to the Thessalonians: “Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess 5:16-18). The apostle is a model for us to follow.

Life throws many difficult and complicated things our way. David Roper says that some of the tougher tests come a little further along. I agree. And yet that need not diminish our gratitude and joy, because the source of these things is not based on circumstances or possessions. We might be thankful for the job, or the new car, or the trip to Hawaii. But we are also called to be thankful and rejoice if we lose our job, if we have to sell the car, or need to cancel the trip. That is because gratitude and joy are based on our relationship with our Father and are spiritual in nature.

The opposite of gratitude is resentment. Henri Nouwen writes:

Resentment and gratitude cannot coexist, since resentment blocks the perception and experience of life as a gift. My resentment tells me that I don’t receive what I deserve. It always manifests itself in envy. Gratitude, however, goes beyond the ‘mine’ and ‘thine’ and claims the truth that all of life is a pure gift. In the past I always thought of gratitude as a spontaneous response to the awareness of gifts received, but now I realize that gratitude can also be lived as a discipline. The discipline of gratitude is the explicit effort to acknowledge that all I am and have is given to me as a gift of love, a gift to be celebrated with joy.¹

Gratitude. Paul will have a strong word about complaining and grumbling, something that plagued Israel in the wilderness. Gratitude is a choice. It requires effort, and it must be practiced. An old Russian proverb says, “Nothing ages faster than gratitude.” This is why words of thanksgiving are written into the Psalter for God’s people to repeat often. Like Paul, we must thank our God for each and every gift that we receive. Gratitude for even the smallest of gifts helps us form a habit.

Joy. The opposite of joy is sorrow and sadness. “In our world, joy and sorrow exclude each other. Here below, joy means the absence of sorrow and sorrow the absence of joy. But such distinctions do not exist in God. Jesus, the Son of God, is the man of sorrows, but also the man of complete joy.”²

Many people in our body are hurting in these difficult times. The pain and sadness are real and we should not pretend that it isn’t there. I know how easy it is for me to lament instead of rejoice. But God can still give us joy.

Joy is also a choice, a discipline, and something that must be practiced. We will always encounter rejection, pain, and wounding, “but once you choose to claim the joy hidden in the midst of all suffering, life becomes celebration. Joy never denies sadness, but transforms it to the fertile soil for more joy.”³

What should cause us to be grateful and joyful? Certainly the cross of Christ and the salvation we have received from the Father through the grace of Jesus. But also, like Paul, we have gratitude and joy for the people whom God has placed in our lives. Our life is a tapestry of relationships and a celebration of how God uses “all” of us to bring beauty and light and grace in the midst of weakness, brokenness, and darkness. The more we focus on the transforming and glorious work of the Lord in the lives of people, the more we will be thankful and joyful.

The book of Philippians will challenge us to humble ourselves and become servants of Christ; to stand distinct from the world both individually and corporately as God’s chosen, holy, beloved people; and to choose joy and gratitude despite the circumstances in our life. I pray that we “all” receive the Word of the Lord with power.

Now may the God who has called us to be his holy and beloved people fill our hearts with thanksgiving and joy to the praise of his glory. Amen.

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 85.

² Nouwen, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, 118.

³ Nouwen, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, 116.