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Ingredients for Prayer

Phillipians 1:3-11 3 I thank my God every time I remember you, 4 constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, 5 because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 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. 7 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, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. 8 For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. 9 And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight 10 to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, 11 having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Psalms 16:5-11 The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; You hold my lot. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage. I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Today I continue with the second in my Epiphany and Lenten sermon series "Praying with the Stars," looking at several of the prayers in the Bible that are striking in one way or another and which have much to teach us. Now, you could spend years on such a series, and indeed I hope to re-visit the topic from time to time - for the Bible is full of prayers of all sorts and offered in all kinds of circumstances. But for these weeks, we will be looking at just a few of those potential prayer candidates, some familiar to many of us and some, perhaps, ones that are fresh to you. Today's prayer comes from St. Paul, in his letter to the church at Philippi. The letter, scholars tell us, was most

likely written very late in Paul's life, a year or two before his martyrdom in Rome, and written while under house arrest where the Romans had put him on charges of being what we might call being a disturber of the peace. He is looking back and remembering both the Philippian church's kindness to him and their faithfulness to the gospel even when that was not an easy thing in an era when often Christians were at best mocked and at worst sacrificing their very lives for their faith due to their unwillingness to acknowledge the emperor as a god or to serve in the military.

Today's sermon title is "Ingredients for Prayer." In a way, it's a rather presumptuous title because I can't imagine saying in 15 minutes everything that could be said on that topic. And yet, Paul's words here to the Philippian church do teach us about several important things that our prayers can and should include and so this morning I want to name just three of those, out of all the things that could be said on the topic and regarding this scripture. So let's see what those three things are:

You've begun to figure out that I am, shall we say, a "grammar geek." I love language and find joy in the fascinating ways that language works (and sometimes doesn't work), and here is what strikes me about Paul's prayer and praise this morning: it is a combination of "doing" and "being." What do I mean? Well, look at the verbs: thank, remember, pray, think, long for, determine, produce. Action verbs, "doing" verbs. But then there's the other sorts of verbs, the "being" verbs: I am, that you may be. Doing and being, action and attitude. For, you see, Paul knew, as do we all who have lived very much at all, that life is lived between, actually sometimes ricocheting back and forth between, all kinds of, shall we say, polarities: already and not-yet, life and death, joy and sorrow, and so much more - including doing and being. Now, those

aren't exactly opposites yet they ARE two very different things and both are necessary ingredients for a mature Christian life, and both need to be a part of one's prayers. Every one of us has known the tyranny of the to-do list, the "doing" that sometimes seems overwhelming. But all of us have also probably known those times when we seemed stuck, when our state of being seemed immobilized by anger, fear, resentment, sadness, worry or a hundred other things. A fulfilled Christian life will have a goodly component of what I call "worthy **doing**" - that is, activities that don't drain you but which make the world a better place, which help someone, which reflect the purposes God has for you. But a fulfilled Christian life will also have a focus on "**being**," times when, as the Palmist enjoins, to "*be still and know that I am God,*" times when you stop the doing and reflect on who you are and the kind of person you want to be and honestly assess whether you are moving in that direction. **So, a first ingredient of prayer would mirror what Paul writes: Praying to God ought to include both "being" and "doing,"** it ought to include those worthy *activities* that you want to be about but also a desire to simply "be," to be aware of and attuned to the presence of God.

There's a second ingredient of prayer that seems to me to be crucial, and again, Paul's words mirror it; did you hear it? "*That your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best....*" In fact, here we have, if not a polarity of opposites, two things that nonetheless can sometimes stand in tension with each other – love and knowledge. I suspect you know what I mean, because I suspect we have all known persons – or maybe sometimes we have

been that person – who would rather be right than loving, who takes what almost seems like joy in showing a superior knowledge, who doesn't understand or care about picking his battles but takes on everyone on everything if he believes that they are wrong about something. Do you know those folks? Or maybe you're more acquainted those folks, on the other hand, who shy away from virtually any contention about principle, preferring to excuse any kind of behavior or mean words or attitudes under the guise of wanting to be loving. Have you known folks – maybe you have even been among those folks at times – who had an utter horror of any and all conflict, no matter the stakes or the principles, who out of wanting to be “loving” valiantly sought peace at any price?

Paul's prayer – and so this is **our second ingredient for prayer** – is that we need to be **asking God for the appropriate balance of “knowledge” and “love.”** We do indeed want to be the sort of people who know what is right, whose knowledge of the world and amazing diversity of those in it, increases day by day. We want to be people who indeed seek to understand others, particularly those who are different from us, particularly those whom we may be inclined not to care for or to criticize – remembering that often the very things that most annoy us about others are secretly things that most bother us about ourselves. And we do want to be loving. We want to be people who love and we want to be people who don't draw boundaries for our love with lines that actually don't matter to God at all. In all this, it actually seems that Paul's prayer that the Philippian church – and you and I – be possessed of **both** love and knowledge is in fact a way of praying for that old, old Biblical concept of **wisdom**. For in the ancient Jewish tradition, “wisdom” combines both knowledge and love. And such wisdom knows the relative importance (and sometimes **non**-importance) of things,

wisdom does not shy from principled stands and doesn't seek peace at the price of human dignity or discrimination but also knows – and this is so key – that to be wise is also to be humble. To be wise – filled with both knowledge and love – is to acknowledge that there may always be more light to illumine us, ways that we have had an incomplete understanding, things that others can teach us, or that – to put it plainly – we may be wrong! So, to sum all of this up, **a second ingredient of prayer to be found in Paul's words to the Philippians is to always be pray for more knowledge and more love, that you might be wiser tomorrow than you were able to be yesterday.**

My favorite lines in this passage of scripture are these: *"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."* Why are these words my favorite? Because they so beautifully express what I believe to be at the heart of mature Christian faith, and it is indeed our third ingredient of prayer: **praying in thanksgiving for those who shared the gospel with us, those who have helped to make us who we are, those whom we are privileged to be joined to as an extended family.** It's a line I've used before and you'll doubtless hear me use it again: there are no self-made Christians. Someone - actually many someones – taught you the faith, modeled and continues to model for you Christian behavior in the face of this or that challenge, reminded you in word and deed that the care of Christ is forever, showed you when times were hard what it meant to be surrounded by the love of the

church - the very Body of Christ in this world. No wonder Paul says “*constantly praying with joy... because of your sharing in the gospel*”! Because it is oh-so-true.

And on this morning, when we are privileged to have our Regional Minister, José Morales, honoring us with his presence in worship, I also want to say that part of our thanksgiving, part of the ingredient for our prayer life, needs to be gratitude for those now and in the past who have been part of our wider Disciples family. That’s the way I often express it because the word “denomination” can sound so bureaucratic. Yet here is what I want to remind all of us of this morning: our thanksgiving for those who have shared the gospel with us needs to always include that wider church family, past and present, that denomination that has helped make us who we are. For you see, in this era of church shopping and very little “denominational loyalty,” its easy to forget that the kind of church that First Christian is didn’t come from nowhere; it’s not an accident. And so I would say this: if you are grateful for the kind of understanding of what it means to be Christian that you have found here, if you have found inspiration, comfort, and wisdom in the preaching of Dr. Hatler and Dr. Hile and Dr. Bernaking, if you have been grateful even if you didn’t quite know how to name it for an expression of the Christian faith that truly wanted to try to accept everyone and not bash anyone, and to not have ideological or theological or political tests of who was allowed to be here – then your prayers and mine needs to include regular gratitude for our denominational forebears and family who have helped to make us who we are.

Because, again, ***it didn’t just happen.*** One-hundred and fifty years ago church women all over the country saved their egg money and helped make Disciples colleges and seminaries possible. Evangelists and preachers and ordinary Christian folks

started congregations throughout this state and this country because they believed that the table of our Lord Jesus Christ ought to unite us in ways that nothing should overcome. Over the years, men and women throughout this and the surrounding states gave sacrificially that there could be, first, state evangelistic organizations and now what we call the Regional Church so that youth could be nurtured through church camps in ways that would stay with them and ground them their whole lives long, so that congregations would have resources to help them in hard times, so that orphans could be cared for in an effort that we can trace down to this day as the Tennyson Center for Children. *None of it just happened.* And none of it we should take for granted. Which means two things: a regular ingredient of our prayers indeed ought to be thankfulness for those who helped shape this part of the Body of Christ that is our beloved home, and that **we** ought to work very hard to be the kind of people about whom it will be said a hundred years from now that “they made us who WE are” because the kind of witness the Disciples have is so continually crucial in a world that is so prone to fragmentation and divisiveness.

So, my friends, my counsel - Paul’s counsel, really – on this morning is that we ought to embody those three ingredients in our prayers: First, **pray that you might both “be well” and “do well.”** Second, **that you would have both knowledge and love.** And finally that your prayers always, always, **always include thanksgiving for those, as Paul writes, who have shared in the gospel with you,** who have helped to form you, who have helped across the miles and the years to make this congregation what and who it is. For all these things, thanks be to God. Amen.