

## Moved to Practice Faith

A Sermon by Jessica C. Gregory

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Philippians 1:1-18a (read from Common English Version)

The best way to test one's persuasive writing skills is to use them. Ms. Lockwood, an English teacher at Xavier High School in New York City came up with a novel approach to getting her students to use the persuasive writing skills she taught them. Ms. Lockwood tasked her students with writing to their favorite author and asking him or her to visit the school. One of the most popular authors chosen was Kurt Vonnegut; he got letters from five students! The writer of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Cat's Cradle*, *Mother Night*, and many others was a respected and intriguing figure for the youth. He was the only author to respond to the assignment. He did not visit but did write them a letter.

*Dear Xavier High School, and Ms. Lockwood,*

*I thank you for your friendly letters. You sure know how to cheer up a really old geezer (84) in his sunset years. I don't make public appearances anymore because I now resemble nothing so much as an iguana.*

*What I had to say to you, moreover, would not take long, to wit: Practice any art, music, singing, dancing, acting, drawing, painting, sculpting, poetry, fiction, essays, reportage, no matter how well or badly, not to get money and fame, but to experience becoming, to find out what's inside you, to make your soul grow.*

*Seriously! I mean starting right now, do art and do it for the rest of your lives. Draw a funny or nice picture of Ms. Lockwood and give it to her. Dance home after school and sing in the shower and on and on. Make a face in your mashed potatoes. Pretend you're Count Dracula.*

*Here's an assignment for tonight, and I hope Ms. Lockwood will flunk you if you don't do it: Write a six-line poem, about anything, but rhymed. No fair tennis without a net. Make it as good as you possibly can. But don't tell anybody what you're doing. Don't show it or recite it to anybody, not even your girlfriend or parents or whatever, or Ms. Lockwood. OK?*

*Tear it up into teeny-weeny pieces and discard them into widely separated trash receptacles. You will find that you have already been gloriously rewarded for your poem. You have experienced becoming, learned a lot more about what's inside you, and you have made your soul grow.*

*God bless you all!*

*Kurt Vonnegut*

How inspiring and encouraging it must have been for those high school students to hear Ms. Lockwood read this letter to them. Their writing hero told them to write, just for fun and told them that in doing so they would make their *soul grow*, not merely become a

better writer. Never mind that Ms. Lockwood had encouraged them to do just this all year- this was different. If Kurt Vonnegut said to do it, they would! Words take on deeper meaning depending on the one who writes them, or who says them.

Paul's words had deep meaning to the Philippians. These early Christians were doing their best to maintain the Church that their dear friend Paul had begun among them years ago. They remembered his teachings about Jesus and how they were called to live — loving one another as they loved themselves, forgiving each other for wrongdoing, proclaiming the Good News to the community and beyond — but it was getting hard. The Philippians were having trouble getting along with one another and struggled to keep the faith community unified. They needed their leader back. They needed *his* encouragement, *his* prayers, *his* confidence in the Lord.

Paul knew this. As we know, Paul wrote letters to many Christian communities — Ephesus, Corinth, Rome and more — but the people of Philippi were his favorites. Just like a teacher who says she loves all of her students, but really DOES have a favorite, Paul had a favorite too and it was the Church at Philippi. He felt constant and strong affection for the Philippians — agape love.

The letter he writes to them is one of loyalty, friendship and deep joy, even though he writes from prison, a dark, cold and lonely place. There was nothing joyful about Paul's prison stays, but nothing but joy as Paul remembers friends. Part of the reason he writes is to let these friends know that, though he is in jail, he is okay. He is okay in part because of the joy remembering their church gives him: "I'm thankful for all of you every time I pray, and it's always a prayer full of joy.... You are all partners in God's grace, both during my time in prison and in the defense and support of the gospel. (1:4, 7b)

Paul's ministry with the Philippians was truly a ministry of partnership. He partnered with *all* his siblings in Christ in the creation of the Philippian Church and he writes to *all* of them from his prison cell. He could have exercised the chain of command understood by the Romans, a chain that recognizes authority in specific leaders. These leaders then require their followers to carry out the letter writers' wishes. But Paul was friends not just with the church leaders in Philippi, he was friends with and loved the entire church community. In the first seven verses, Paul refers to *all* of the community five times, for *every member* of the Church is important. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, the Church is like a single body that has many parts and all of the parts are essential, as we all know when we hurt any one of them. Whether we endure a stubbed pinky toe or a slipped disk in our back, our body is compromised. Each part must work well for the body to be healthy. Each part must work well to be in *harmony*.

Paul writes to the Philippians having learned that their community has become one of discord. The different members of the Body are not working well with one another and the whole Body is weakened. This gives Paul great distress because he has witnessed the power of God within this Church. Agape love is strong and empowering them to share the gospel with zeal! Paul believes that this ministry will continue: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion..." (Philippians 1:6) but this good work is being stalled by the discord, which brings Paul to write this prayer for his friends in Philippi, which begins: "...that your love might become even more and more rich with knowledge and all kinds of insight." (Philippians 1:9) In

connecting love and knowledge, Paul's words remind us of the Great Commandment, as taught by Jesus: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." (Matthew 22:37)

Through knowledge we are led to loving action, action we would not otherwise take. Action that we know is appropriate because of the knowledge we have gained through our research and through our education. Former Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan's often repeated quote is true: "Knowledge is power. Information is liberating. Education is the premise of progress, in every society, in every family." One who understands this well is Malala Yousafzai, relentless advocate and blogger for girls' education.

Thanks to an educator mother, Malala received an education in her homeland of Mingora, Pakistan until 2007, when Malala was 10, and the Taliban took over her community. Malala blogged about living under the Taliban for the BBC, sharing with the world the way of life that was imposed on her community — bans on entertainment, public executions, harsh punishment and, in 2008, banning girls from school. Getting shot by the Taliban in 2012 could not stop Malala from proclaiming the right for girls to get their education. Knowledge is power. Information is liberating. Education IS the premise of progress, and Malala yearned for her peers and her community to have progress.

Paul yearned for his beloved Philippi community to make progress too, progress in sharing the gospel with one another and with their world. Paul yearned for his friends to know Jesus' teachings more fully and thus more deeply understand the love God has for each and every one of them. If the Philippians know more deeply the love God has for them, they will be able to better love each other. It is this healing and growth that Paul yearns for the Philippians to have, and love and knowledge will make it possible. Then, and only then, when love becomes rich with knowledge, Paul encourages the Philippians to *decide what really matters* so that they will be sincere and faithful in their actions.

Paul's prayer continues: "I pray [that your love will be rich in knowledge] so that you will be able to decide what really matters and so you will be sincere and blameless on the day of Christ." (Philippians 1:10) With these two verses, Paul gave the Philippians, and gives to us today, instructions on how to practice our faith. First, our love must be rich with knowledge and insight. Then, we must decide what really matters.

Kurt Vonnegut's love for life and family grew as he learned the preciousness of mortality in WWII. After surviving a POW camp in Dresden, purely by accident, and then having the unenviable task of cleaning up the remains of those killed, what really mattered was for him to do what made his soul grow — to write.

From her mother and by reading lots of books, among other things, Malala's love for her peers and for education deepened and helped her discern that education for girls really mattered. Mattered enough to get shot for speaking out about it.

Paul's experience of conversion, literally becoming blind for three days before being given his sight, was a powerful beginning to his journey of faith. His love for God deepened as he traveled in the name of Jesus and proclaimed the Good News, seeing God's work first hand as he composed new faith communities, like the one in Philippi. Paul knew deep in his soul that the gospel of Jesus Christ mattered most in life, even if it meant Paul's death.

As Christians, Paul's model of faithfulness and the authority with which he wrote moved the Philippians, and moves us, to action. Moved to practice faith — in the Philippians' situation that meant working together to strengthen the church and share the gospel with those beyond its walls; being intentional to focus on *what really matters* to make those ministries flourish, both as one body of believers and as individual members with unique skills, gifts and personalities. In our situation, I think our being moved to practice our faith is the same, though in our community, our sharing of the gospel beyond these walls looks different. We, the Body of Believers that is Northminster Presbyterian Church and each distinctive member, or part of it, must grapple with the question: *What really matters?*

Last year I watched an online financial seminar about budgeting. To help curb unnecessary spending, the webinar suggested that before buying anything you should ask yourself this question: Could you live in safety and dignity without this? I do not ask myself this question before each purchase I make, but if I did I am sure I would have more money in the bank! This is an interesting question, turned around a little, to look at from a church or ministry perspective: Where do we see people living without safety and dignity? How can our love and knowledge of Jesus and our desire to act out that love create safety and dignity for them?

We have seen people living without safety and dignity in our Evanston community due to living without a home and we have given it to them through our Family Promise ministry. Two weeks ago, our guests arrived to find bedrooms, a prepared meal and warm friendly faces to welcome them and guide them on their stay. The guests found respect and respite from a wearying journey. Dozens of you made this ministry a reality, and each contributed to the safety and dignity that the visiting families experienced. This ministry is what really matters, friends.

This morning's scripture reminds us of what moves us to engage in such powerful ways. Love grows rich with knowledge, illuminating our way to action. This year the Mission and Social Justice Committee offers us a rare opportunity to act on a new issue that *really matters*. They have five thousand dollars available to fund new mission ministries!

The questions for us are: What are the things that really matter to us? Where do we feel that our action is necessary? Where are people's safety and dignity compromised? What are the issues that we want to understand more, that we might discern how we are called to act? What will move us to practice faith in new ways? There are many answers to these questions and I invite you to take the time to think of your own. Just skimming through Thursday's *Roundtable*, I got an idea. Looking at the picture of Evanstonians with their "Stand Against Racism" signs proudly held up from the YWCA's Stand Against Racism Event on April 27, I wonder how Northminster might take a stand against racism as a community. We have read books about racism, we have talked about our experiences with it but how might we act? This is just one of dozens of possibilities, Opportunities to practice our faith are endless; the time to engage is now. Let us all reflect on the question: Where do we see people living without safety or dignity? And when we get our answer, may our love be rich with knowledge, may we discern how to act, and may we be moved to practice our faith.