Discerning Love

Philippians 1: 3-11

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We are coming closer to the day you will meet and greet the Pastoral Search Committee’s choice for your new pastor. Next Sunday Deb and I will leave as you Transitional Pastors; we told the Steering Committee in July that we felt that our job was pretty much done! We have checked off the things on our list that we felt were necessary for you to be ready to receive a new pastor. And we want there to be ample time between the time we say good bye and the time you welcome a new pastor so that you have us out of your systems, you are ready to engage anew!

This is not a sermon to say goodbye, however, not yet. We will get to that next Sunday when we both are here. But rather I want to invite you to consider the words of Paul today in the context of the opportunity you will have very soon to meet and get to know your potential new pastor, and what you need to do in order to be ready to make that choice.

It seems to me that calling a pastor is sort of like arranging a marriage! Now I have never arranged a marriage but I do know someone who has lived in one for many, many years. And occasionally I have students who say this is their parents’ expectation for their lives. Here’s how it works: both sets of parents seek someone who will be a good match for their child, someone who will fit with the personality, the values, the needs, the dreams of the other. Each party wants the match to be successful for there is much at stake on both sides. So the parents meet to pitch the strengths of their child to each other. It is trusted that each presents themselves with as much honesty, integrity and good will as is possible. After various means of communication (which has changed with the advent of technology) finally the prospective couple meet each other face to face, in the presence of their parents. Each might have some reservations, some hesitations, but if each trusts that those who have done the searching have done so with the utmost care and with an eye to a long and fruitful life together, then they can go ahead. They can offer themselves to each other, trusting that time and God will provide the missing pieces and warm their hearts to love.

So it is in the pastoral search process in our American Baptist life. Our denomination doesn’t tell us whom to call, doesn’t place pastors in specific churches, telling them when to come or when to go. We trust God’s Spirit. We follow a process where each party reveals themselves to the other, a kind of online match up these days. If each appeals to the other, they talk, then meet. Conversation continues in a variety of ways as the Committee goes to hear the potential pastor preach and as that person comes to visit here. Throughout the process we discern—that is, we perceive, we begin to recognize, we distinguish what it is that draws us together until the decision is made to trust God, to trust one another, and to take a step toward commitment. That final step is made when **you**, the congregation, meets this person the Search Committee has come to respect and imagine as your pastor. That step is made when you worship all together, hear God’s Word in her words, pray together and finally, when you vote. But it’s important to know that although the Search Committee has been working on your behalf, on behalf of the entire congregation, it’s imperative that you participate at this most important stage. ***Your job*** is to seek God’s voice, God’s direction, God’s confirmation, and listen for God’s invitation to offer a call to love and to serve together.

The Apostle Paul knows something about how a pastoral leader and a group of believers can come to love and respect one another. Pauls’ greeting at the beginning of the letter to the church at Philippi begins with thanksgiving, for the joy God has given him in the relationship he’s shared with that communion, and for the work of the gospel that they share. He affirms his belief that “the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion.” (Phil 1:6) He believes this is so because of the time they have shared together, because of the evidence of their faith in God, and because they have accompanied him through difficult times. Paul and this congregation have grown close to one another. They care for each other as they love and serve God.

And so it is with that spirit that he shares his prayer with them: that their “love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help (them) determine what is best…” (Phil. 1:9-10a) What a fitting prayer for *you* as you approach, in just a few weeks, this important threshold, as you prepare to chose your next pastor for this congregation.

Paul desires, more than anything, that these followers of Jesus Christ, these possessors of the Spirit, might invest themselves utterly and completely in love, for God and for each other. Paul is not being sentimental here; he is not talking about feeling good and “making nice.” Rather Paul is talking immersing themselves in love that is insightful; that is, love that is carefully and intentionally thought about, reflected upon, chosen so that it leads us to make decisions and to engage in actions that are righteous, just and compassionate; decisions and actions that produce more love, more wisdom, more of God. How do we do such a thing? We pray, asking God’s wisdom and direction. We reflect, remembering what it is that makes this congregation special in your life, and what you hope it will be. You engage, participate: you come to meet the new pastor, you ask honest, sincere questions, you listen with an open and loving heart. What a powerful pray for you to hear right now! A prayer that your “love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help (them) determine what is best…” (Phil. 1:9-10a) Deb and I pray this prayer for you as you consider this new pastoral call. We pray that you will gauge your response by love: love that leads to knowledge and insight. Love that opens you to hear, to see, to know, to understand both yourself and the other. Paul is not talking about a passive response; this is not the time to stay at home and let others figure this out, so that if someday down the line you aren’t happy, you can blame them! (just like this election!) This love is active and demanding and real! This love is the lens through which we are called to see the world and to see each other. This love is the path to understanding and truth. As you meet and talk with Rev. Ely, do so in love! As you hear her response to questions, and as you hear her preach and pray, do so in love…love that discerns, that reveals, that is open and receptive to all that is new and all that is God!

For Paul believes that love is the filter we must use if we are to understand each other and ourselves. Love is the measure we should hold as we gauge our response. Love is the foundation on which we will build new and lasting relationships. Love is the essential character of the life and heart of God.

It is this love, Paul says, that will “help you determine what is best.” That will enable you to move in new directions; that will open you to new visions and possibilities, which will knit your hearts with a new pastor and with God.

I served a congregation as their Transitional Pastor that was very hurt and broken. During my time there we immersed ourselves in the prayer, “let love grow here.” It took time. It took intentionality. It took hard moments of honesty and joyful moments of grace. But love grew. And they grew. Until they were finally able to use the lens of love, love that was full of knowledge and full of insight, to guide their way into new relationships with a new pastor and with each other.

Love can grow here too. You are not like them; you were not in turmoil when we arrived because you had a good, loving pastor who had accompanied you for many years. You were grieving, yes, but most of you have been able to find the proper perspective for that season and live into new relationship with Deb and I, which tells us you are ready to do that with another. We have been privileged to accompany you on this journey and have come to love you. You have widened the circle of our family of faith. But we were not called to you for the long haul; we are not here to stay forever. So now you need to turn your hearts to one who *is* hearing that call, the call to fall in love with you, the call to embrace you, the call to struggle and succeed with you, the call to share the gospel in grief and joy with you and the community in this place.

Our prayer for you is the prayer Paul prayed for the congregation he had come to know and love. As you prepare to meet and hear and vote on Pastor Ely, we pray that “love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help (them) determine what is best….” (Phil. 1:9-10a) Let love be your guide as you meet and listen and discern. Let love bring you knowledge and insight. Trust God. Trust your Search Committee. Trust each other. The results, says Paul, will be a “harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.” (Phil 1: 11) May it be joyfully so!