OUR PARTNERSHIP IN THE GOSPEL

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"I thank my God in all my remembrance of>you, always in every prayer of mine for you all, making my prayer^with joy, thankful for your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now." (Phil. 1:3-5)

You may have seen the poster around campus that advertised the beginning of our Chapel services this spring. It shows a small fishing boat, the Little Flower II, leaving the Gloucester Marine and Tracking Company after repairs.

I have the feeling that this is where we are this morning, with Epiphany, Lent and the season of Easter now on the horizon before us: getting ourselves launched together, readying ourselves anew for what Paul calls our partnership in the Gospel. Our interpretive pilgrimage this spring will take us through Philippians, Galatians, and much of I Corinthians. Quite a voyage! Ambitious, but full of promise.

Now Epiphany, as you know, means manifestation. So to have the letter to the Philippians before us this season is particularly appropriate. For this letter of Paul, perhaps unlike any other, is concerned with the manifestation of the Gospel: confessing the grace that is given, rather than arguing or challenging people in its behalf.

Paul is in prison, writing to his friends and supporters in the early Christian community at Philippi, in northern Greece. His heart is full of affection for them. He wants to celebrate all the good things they have in common. This isn't a contentious letter, as Paul's letters can sometimes be. It's born of the undefensive freedom of trust and solidarity.

This is surely a good place for us to begin our voyage anew in this Chapel this semester: to begin by celebrating what we have in common: our solidarity in Christ and, through him, with each other. Otherwise we might fall captive to those pressures for business that most of us feel all the time, setting out to do things because they're there, as it were, rather than acting on the basis of who we are and what we have been given.

I

So I turn to my theme this morning, suggested by a phrase in the first chapter of Philippians: our partnership in the Gospel. I want to lift up a few of the rich themes of Philippians 1, to begin to show you what Paul means by that expression. What is our partnership in the Gospel?

As we look at the first chapter, I think we can say that it takes two forms: first, being called together; second, being sent out.

At the beginning of his letter Paul addresses "all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi." (1:1) As Christians, he is suggesting, as a people who gain our identity from our common participation in the reality of Christ Jesus, our crucified and risen Lord, we are saints. We are a holy people, as the word saint suggests, separated out of the world.

It is said that in the near East to this very day, sheep herders -- shepherds — can call to vast flocks of sheep, owned by various people, and that their own sheep will hear their call and follow them. So we are called apart by Christ.

It's good to say this to ourselves from time to time. For afterall, in many ways you and I are like all the rest of the sheep around us, are we not?
We speak the same language, we wear the same kind of clothes, live in the same kind of rooms, read the same kind of books, flunk the same kind of exams, and so on. We face the same kind of uncertainties about our future, we experience the same kind of stresses in interpersonal relationships, we sometimes make the same kind of hesitant commitments and the same kind of blunders in politics, and so on.

But we are different. As we identify our lives with Christ's, we become a holy people, saints called apart from the world to be together, to be special.

And more. We are called together in Christ, out of the world, not just to be different, not just to be apart from the world, not somehow to escape reality, but rather to enter into a new kind of reality, as Paul says, -- "to be partakers of Grace." (1:7)

Imagine now that you have received an invitation from some famous person to come and meet her at a specified time and place. Perhaps out of curiosity, perhaps for other reasons, you go. When you arrive, however, and when you finally locate the gathering, you find a bunch of people crowded into a room, milling around, like some big cocktail party. And it turns out that the best you can do that evening is to make some small-talk with a few people and to catch sight of the hostess from afar, as she seems preoccupied on the other side of the room. So you return home, not long after you arrived, dissatisfied.

That's not the way the saints are called together. We're not only called together apart from the world to be a special people, but we're also called together to be partakers of grace. It's rather as if when you respond to the invitation and go to the right place, the hostess herself runs out to meet you before you even push to doorbell. She calls you by name, and she takes you by the hand into the gathering. She introduces you one by one to all her friends, and places you at a lovely dinner table, where you feast in festivity and friendship until the dawn.

So we are called together not just to be a special people apart from the world, but also to be partakers of grace, to taste the sweetness of Christ's life among us, and to share the joy which we have in him with each other. That's one essential aspect of our partnership in the Gospel, as we see it depicted in Philippians .. We are called apart to partake together of the grace of Christ.

II.

The other essential aspect of our partnership in the gospel is our being sent out. Not only are we called together apart from the world to be partakers of grace, we're sent out by God to manifest that new reality in the world, as Paul says, "to advance the Gospel."(1:12) Or, as Paul says in II Corinthians, we are "ambassadors for Christ."(5:20)

Interestingly enough, the very expression"partnership in the Gospel" suggests this point. It's an unusual construction in the Greek, suggesting motion and purpose, and is perhaps best translated "Partnership toward the Gospel."
Our gathering together to be partakers of grace is surely a worthy and a necessary end in itself, in other words. The word which is translated '■'partnership" here, koinonia, leaves no doubt of that. It is rich with the connotations of solidarity with Christ, apart from any further purpose. But there is a further purpose also. As members of Christ, we are not called together to be some kind of static, insulated community away from it all, existing in some regal, religious isolation— although throughout the Church's history it has on occasion given in to that temptation.
Our partnership is toward the Gospel. Our partnership constantly propels us to be ambassadors for Christ in the world. We may indeed rightly feast together in joy until the dawn, but then the day comes and our work is at hand.

Christ is made manifest, then, not only when we come together to praise his name, but also when we live in the world, when we pursue our various vocations, when we take on special assignments, depending on our own gifts and our own situations.

III.

Of the many rich images that Paul gives us here in Philippians one, depicting our manifestation of Christ in the world, describing our being sent out as ambassadors, I want to focus on only two.

One of these is love, which as we know from I Corinthians 13, is the highest of all gifts, as far as Paul is concerned. No self-sacrifice, no evangelistic fervor, no ecstatic experience of speaking in tongues, no encounter with the principalities and powers of this world for sake of justice — none of these amount to anything, according to Paul, unless they are done in love.

These are Paul's words about love in Philippians 1. A more magnificent summary of the dynamism of the Christian life is probably found nowhere else in the New Testament. So rich are these few sentences, indeed, that I want to consider them only for a moment, to ask you to contemplate these words, and to mark them in your souls: "And it is my prayer," Paul writes, "that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of r*-ghti$_O$usness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God." (1:9-11)

This is undoubtedly, in Paul's view, the most important thing that can be said about being ambassadors for Christ in the world: that we seek to manifest the love of Christ in everything we do -- or, better, that we allow the love of Christ to inspire and to empower everything we do. This is the guiding light, the heart, the inmost truth, of our being sent out into the world as ambassadors of Christ.

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IV.

With this guiding light of love around us, the aura of Christ's love manifesting itself in our lives, our service in the world as ambassadors also has another more specific aspect: we are sent out, as Paul suggests, to speak the Word of God boldly^ without fear.(1:14)

We have been to this glorious banquet. We have been called together to be partakers of grace, to be a holy people. Our hostess has called each one of us by name and placed us at the table with her friends, and we have rejoiced together until the dawn.
Now she asks us to go out and to invite others to become partakers of grace, as well: a natural request, for such a gracious person, and one which we will respond to freely, given the character of our reception at the banquet.

Have you ever noticed how people talk about the good restaurants they've been to? Even at good restaurants, they talk about other good restaurants. Likewise, when you've had a specially good time with an intimate circle of friends. It's natural to tell others about the joy you've experienced. So once we have become partakers of grace, it's only natural for us to talk to others about the whole experience.

But I think we have to be cautious here, and not to be taken in by any stereotypes of what speaking the Word of God boldly can mean. Sometimes it can be a visible, public event. Sometimes it can be a quiet, perhaps hesitating conversation, with a friend. Also, as we know from the prophets of the Old Testament and from the life of Paul himself, the Word can be proclaimed in many forms, non-verbally, as well as verbally.

We have a case in point in the events of one of Paul's own visits to Philippi, narrated for us in the Book of Acts. Paul is followed by a slave girl, "who," we are told, "had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by soothsaying." (Acts. 16:16) Paul heals her in the name of Christ and so bears witness to the power of Christ.
It turns out that he gets himself in hot water with the authorities -- since the owners of the slave girl had protested that what Paul was doing was not good for business.
This is one vignette depicting Paul's active manifestation of the Word of God.

Another follows close on the heels of this one. Later, in prison, Paul and Silas are praying and singing hymns. An earthquake happens, and they are freed, but they do not flee. Rather, they say to the jail keeper'who was just about to kill himself: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household. And they spoke the Word of the Lord to him and to all that were in the house."

Here we see Paul not in a public context, but in the intimacy of a home, conversing with the jailer and his family, we might imagine, as friends. The whole sequence ends with the jailer feeding Paul and Silas in his own home.
This, then, is a more private, personal vignette of Paul's own speaking the Word of God boldly, and withbut fear.

You can think of other vignettes from the New Testament, too, accounts of simple folk and sophisticated teachers, recent converts and those more mature in the faith, -- all, in various ways, as that wonderful hymn of our childhood says, telling the story of Jesus and his love.

If you were to write a vignette about your own life, in this regard, what would it look like? Would you see yourself taking on the authorities, for the sake of healing the oppressed? Would you see yourself, like Paul on Mars hill, developing the meaning of the Gospel in the context of the intellectual life? Would you see yourself among friends, or perhaps talking to some one in trouble whose life happens to intersect with yours?

How would you see yourself? Undoubtedly we have as many vignettes to be told here today as we have people. But the important point is not How we proclaim the Word of God boldly, but That we do it.

This, then, in short compass is what it means for us to be sent out as ambassadors of Christ: to be inspired by love in everything we say and do and, as God may give us utterance, to speak the Word boldly without fear, to tell the story of Jesus and his love in every way we can.

V

Now I think that this is enough of Philippians 1 to launch us on our voyage together this semester. This is enough, I think, to suggest what our partnership in the Gospel can and does mean for us.

You and I are called together, apart from the world, as this morning, to be partakers of Grace, We are also sent out, as this morning, so that our love might abound in all things and that we might speak the Wor'd of God boldly and without fear.

So, welcome aboard! And -- bon voyage!

"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all, making my prayer with joy, thankful for your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now." Amen.