

Drawer Full of Letters

In the past month, the leadership team of St. Hagop has spent significant time writing personal letters. At our young professional's gathering our outreach ministry chair Grace Austin passed thanksgiving cards around the table to sign and send to our homebound parishioners. In my office that week I was doing the same, writing personal notes of appreciation to as many of our stewards as I could. We take time for this as a church, because there is something powerful, even sacramental, about a handwritten letter. It can capture and deepen intimate bonds between people. There is spirit involved here, which is why I get into the spirit of writing to parishioners by first rereading letters I've received from parishioners. I have a drawer full of letters, and maybe you do too, that I can't bear to throw away because of the spirit of love and gratitude that is captured within them. It should not be too surprising then to find that the worldwide Christian church also has a drawer full of letters that it can't bear to throw away; forming a large section of our Bible. These 2000 year old letters, which we reread every week, capture the relational and applied spirit of our faith, the living bond of love between God and his people.

Before we get to our church's special letters, however, let's say a few words about the unique form of personal letters. Letters are especially intimate forms of communication. Sometimes I read old letters from previous generations, back when people knew the art of letter writing, and I am deeply moved by the thought and feeling which pours from them. Nowadays our communication is instant, efficient and technical. 'I'll meet you in the far parking lot behind the office at 7pm (emoji, emoji).' But digital communication isn't conducive to communicating in depth. I have never gotten a text expressing this excerpt from a real letter I received, 'I still remember the day ten years ago when you helped me when I least expected it, but most needed it. For this I am most grateful to you and our church.' I've rarely gotten an email or text like this, which is why I have deleted one hundred thousand of them, but will hold on to my drawer full of hand written letters forever.

We read from the church's drawer full of intimate letters today. Two thousand years after they were written, we still reread and cherish these letters every Sunday. Like all good letters, they remind us of the bond of love between faithful members of our church and God through Christ. But beyond this, these holy letters remind us of two key aspects of our faith; that it takes place between people, not alone, and that our faith must be applied to be real.

Today's letter from Paul to the Christians in Philippi is a fine example. It is hard to excerpt, you really must read the whole thing to experience the sense of love and joy exuded by a community united in faith. It begins; "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi... Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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.... And it is my prayer 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."—Pp. 1:1-4, 8-10

As Paul goes on, his writings aren't disembodied teachings that stand alone like commandments. They are letters between living people, heart to heart, from a community who cares deeply for each other. Paul's letters show real-life church Christianity, warts and all, where God uses each of us to challenge and encourage each other in faith. He writes about being wronged by someone in the community and forgiving them. He writes of what he has done wrong to others and how he has been forgiven. In a word, Paul's letters capture communities that are growing together in faith, including the growing pains that require constant forgiveness, patience and sacrifice to mature into true Christian fellowship. That quality of long-suffering love is what makes

Paul's letter to the Philippians so powerful. Paul is writing this letter from jail; imprisoned for practicing his faith and expecting he would lose his life. Following the path of Our Lord, Paul doesn't just talk about sacrifice and love in the face of evil; he lives it and shares it through his letters.

May we live such lives and write such letters of long suffering love to each other. May our faith be relational and intimate, applying the ideals of our faith in real life, even as it requires sacrifice to do so. And may we model our lives after the words of Mother Teresa who said; 'I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing God who is sending a love letter to the world.' These handwritten letters of our lives will be kept in a special place by God and never ever tossed aside; now and always and unto the ages of ages, amen.