

Congregational Church of La Jolla UCC
Rev. Tim Seery
October 11, 2026

Philippians 4: 1-9

*Let us join our hearts in prayer: God of the Big Things, the Small Things, and Everything In-between:
May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be found acceptable in your
sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

If you've been around for the past month or so the lectionary texts have taken us through several parables—all based in vineyards—giving an a sort of down home earthiness to Jesus' grand theological messages. And this week the parable that the lectionary hands us is called "The Parable of the Wedding Banquet." About a king who throws a banquet and can't convince anyone to come—and so in a fit of rage he throws out his guest list and tells his laborers to go out and just find anyone they can who will come—a bunch of strangers that are literally pulled off the street and you think about that and it's sort of a beautiful thing—all of these people who have just been invited for no reason whatsoever. But weirdly, the story ends with a dress code infraction. Someone shows up not in wedding clothes. And so they deal with this by binding the man's hands and feet and throwing him out. It's bizarre. Maybe someday I will decide to unpack that one. But that's not what you heard this morning. You heard something totally different. Usually I focus solely on the Gospel portion of the lectionary but there's so much more to it. Each week we are entrusted with an entire set of texts: Old Testament, Gospel, a Psalm, and an Epistle—which is one of the early Christian writings usually in the form of letters that tell the stories of the first followers of Jesus following his death. And so that's what you heard today is a section of Paul's letter to the Philippians. Who are the Philippians? They were the Christians that were gathered in the city of Philippi which today is in Macedonia. Historically, Philippi stands out for one big historical event—in 42 BC this was the place where Mark Anthony defeated Brutus and Cassius, the storied assassins of Julius Caesar. Later on Octavian would defeat Mark Antony and would rebuild the city of Philippi—they stationed retired soldiers there so that the city would remain loyal to Rome. In a sense you could think of it like a San Diego in that it was a military town and it was on the furthest fringes of the empire sort of remote and out on its own—most of it's infrastructure were military bases and because of this residents enjoyed some benefits—for example, there were no poll or land taxes there and residents could buy and own their own property. This wasn't the case in the other Roman colonies.

So the Apostle Paul arrives to this place year 49, establishes a church there. This is a city that's inhabited by both Romans and Greeks, where most people speak Greek at home but Latin is the official language of business and government. So it's this bilingual, military base outpost on the far edge of the empire, so many similarities to where we live. And this was one of the places Paul hung out and ministered to. And this letter that he writes to them is in essence a really just long thank you note for a financial gift that they had provided to his ministry so that he could be cared for during his time incarcerated and so he's writing this while on house arrest in Rome awaiting his trial before Caesar. The Romans were threatened by his message and so they did as the Romans do, they locked him up. Paul would spend all day writing and then would send these letters out with couriers that would come to deliver things to him, and they'd somehow get these messages from Rome all the way to the provinces. And it was a big deal. This was really risky. But Paul had done all this traveling and he had all of these communities across the Roman colonies who were wanting updates, who needed encouragement—who were living in the midst of their own local issues, and internal church struggles and so Paul is trying to minister to them despite a very challenging set of circumstances.

Commentators sometimes draw comparisons between Paul's prison letters and Martin Luther King Jr's Letter from a Birmingham Jail. Paul's situation was perilous, he wasn't sure if he was going to be sentenced to execution for his socially provocative message, and the community he's writing to is in similar duress—living in this very Roman city, living under the surveillance of the state, being pressured to back off from their insistence that Jesus is the truth and the light of the world. And Paul's task in his

communication to them was to provide them comfort and reassurance, practical advice, and to craft a message that would fuel their commitment to the Gospel. For as complicated as Paul can be you do have to admire the fact that he's the one encouraging the churches and the people outside of prison, while he awaits a possible death sentence—you'd think it would be the other way around—but no, he's the one who is somehow, in those circumstances, able to cobble together a profound message of hope. I don't know about you but if I was awaiting trial and possible execution I'm not sure I'd have a whole lot of mental bandwidth to be giving everyone outside advice about mitigating anxiety. I don't know many who could do that. But that's just who Paul was.

So now with that background in mind we get to take a glimpse at just this short little section from those words that Paul wrote to that church from the depths of his imprisonment. The great theological Karl Bart was a big fan of this particular passage he called it, "one of the liveliest and most allusive writings of Paul, or anywhere at all in the New Testament." Coming from Karl Bart that's an incredible endorsement. It's also a favorite at funerals because it's fixated on an abundant life even in thick of loss and suffering.

Abundant life even in the thick of loss and suffering. It brings to mind my friend Kwaneta who've I've written to for the last 5 years once or twice a month. I've mentioned her in previous sermons. In fact she preached here awhile back vis-a-vis her episode on This American Life which if you remember she dictated over a correctional facility telephone which kept malfunctioning so they ultimately had a voice actor read her dictation. In case you haven't heard, the long story short is that the Unitarian Universalist Association identified awhile back that the faith based programs in America's correctional institutions are very much right wing. They promote messages of hellfire and there's no space for LGBTQ affirmation or the affirmation of other non-Christian faith expressions. And so the Unitarians have a program that pairs us with people who are desperately looking for something different but can't find it. Kwaneta is in a facility in Texas about to start year 18 of a 50 year sentence, and she spent over 5 years of that time in solitary confinement. Which by the way, the United States is the only country where such a thing is possible. The United Nations maximum allowed time is 15 days. Kwaneta is a nurse, a mother, and a veteran and she's what we refer to as a "victimized survivor." Her crime was killing the person who subjected her to years of sexual, emotional, and physical abuse. Just think about that though, 5 years in solitary confinement. That is by the UN's definition an international human rights crime. Done in the name of everyone one of us who are taxpayers. And let me tell you the warden and the officials at Lane Murray Unit in Central Texas don't like her and they sure don't like me. They, of course, read all our mail, and so they tried to tell me a couple years ago that I was a political activist more than I was a real clergy person and they shut down my privileged access to her as her pastor because I was her go between to get contact information from the outside world so that she could apply for grants, fellowships, and writing opportunities. So that her story could be told. But the ACLU and the Unitarian Universalist Association had to intervene to show Texas that the United Church of Christ and Unitarian Universalists are indeed legitimate and not only are we legitimate religious institution we pre-date even the State of Texas and have a history far more illustrious and foundational to this country's history than anything they could ever come up with and like it or not, we aren't progressive despite our faith, we are progressive because our faith compels it. Let me tell you, they hate that.

Which, by the way, those contacts and information that they tried to prevent her having access to led to her teaching a seminar at Yale Law School last semester, landing a gig writing for Teen Vogue, being featured on This American Life, which I shared with you one Sunday, and starting something called the Menopause Project which focuses on providing incarcerated people experiencing menopause the resources they need for the dignity they deserve. And now, Kwaneta is working on going after all of the true crime TV shows which pray upon the families of incarcerated people with the promises of big pay outs so that they can sensationalize and spin their crimes to fit the appetites of the masses thereby deeply hurting that person's chances for future parole. I could talk forever about the sins of Texas, and the sins of this country's prison system. But Kwaneta considers herself a part of this congregation. She knows everything we do. She thinks Cocktails with Clergy sounds like a hoot, when we voted on our building sale she offered to write in a testimony of how much she supported it because she said that we have a moral mandate to be the only place where progressive faith thrives in this community because they have a

chapel at Lane Murray Unit. And the new chaplain there offers pizza to those who help set up for service, but added the caveat that lesbian, bisexual, and trans women need not even show up. Kwaneta get's it. She sees the underbelly of what goes on in this world and she has implored us and given us a mandate to exist to give voice to stories like hers. I'm not sure I told you this but she even convened a prayer circle of women to pray when my mom was sick on the day she had surgery. She asks me to tell you her story so that you can bear witness to it and even from the depths of solitary confinement when she wrote me letters by hand even with her severe arthritis and the cataracts that Texas refused to treat (because they said she still had at least 60% of her vision) she was a source of constant encouragement to me and to this church. And the warden, and the Texas Department of Corrections hates it. The Roman authorities of the Lone Star State aren't fond of a progressive, liberal black woman, who won't be silent, who won't be told to sit down, who outright refused to accept cotton picking as her assigned job task by the prison, and who provides accurate health information as a nurse to the young women with whom she is incarcerated. Who provides hope to the church 1500 miles away that she's never been to, but that who stands in the resistance and who builds tables of inclusion. Kwaneta isn't here on Sunday but she is among us. Kwaneta is carrying forward Paul's work in building the kingdom of heaven on earth and that message is a threat to Texas and the vision it has for the world.

It's just incredible that out of the depths of Paul awaiting his fate, locked up, Roman soldiers standing guard outside or Kwaneta in solitary confinement providing encouragement to this church all through Covid times and beyond—it's incredible that such wise counsel can come from such dire conditions. Sometimes I'd feel silly or a bit guilty that my problems and our problems paled in comparison to what she was facing. I wonder too if the church in Philippi felt similarly? That in the face of what Paul was suffering not all looked so bleak. Their little church conflicts looked tiny in comparison to what he was going through.

This particular set of verses we heard today is interesting because Paul calls out two church members by name: Euodia and Syntyche. Now that's pretty big. It's kind of scandalous. To have the names of two church members called out by Paul. And what's interesting is there's been a lot of conversation over the years about who these two women actually were. Some commentators have even surmised that they might have actually been ordained ministers. There's no way to know for sure but we are fairly certain they were critical people in the life of this congregation. At least, in our system, they'd have been moderators. So this is basically as if Paul wrote us a letter and named Sigrid and Victoria by name. Like that's just fascinating that because of this these two random names have been passed down to us. And so because of this we think they were actually the leaders of the congregation. And so here we are in the first century and two women are leading a congregation which goes to show you how wrong the church got the role of women in the church for all the subsequent centuries. But the reason Euodia and Syntyche were mentioned by name is because they were embroiled in a major conflict. Like a big one. We have no idea what it was. And I'll tell you, I want to know so bad. I want to know what it was. They had major beef with each other. It was so bad that Paul is literally in prison checking in on them. Writing this profound statement to them to be of the mind of Christ. Imploring them to think of what Christ wanted, which was unity—that they all be one. He literally says, I plead with you to be of the mind of Christ.” Whatever it was was so bad, the rancor was so intense that the Apostle Paul himself has to plead with them to lay their differences aside. And he lays it on thick he closes this portion of the letter with a real banger that I imagine when he dictated these words to his scribe the scribe dropped the pen on the floor, he says, “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice.” Put into practice whatever is true, pure, right, noble and praiseworthy.

Part of what we all love about his call out of these two ladies is that it shows you that it doesn't matter if it's year 61 AD, or 1761, or 2026, churches are human. We get into it. So much so that Paul himself had to deal with this. He had to remind them of what the main thing was. And the main thing was not whatever these two women were fighting about. The main thing was what is true and lovely and just. As Chair of

the Southern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ it feels sometimes like I breathe church conflict, and it's heartbreaking. It's tough. We are beyond blessed here by having such a healthy church. And it's something I've learned to not take for granted. But what Paul does is he talks about anxiety in this excerpt of his letter. He says "do not be anxious about anything but to have thanksgiving to have gratitude." Do not be anxious.

Anxiety is just so human. So tender. So real. Not only do we each have our own personal anxieties, systems and institutions are prone to anxiety as well. It's one of the reasons why in school we have to do such intensive training in what's called family systems theory. Which is this school of thought that thinks of church communities like families and that despite our best efforts we have a human tendency to when things get tense, when things get uncomfortable, to reproduce, relive, and rehearse different family relationships we've had. It's actually kind of fascinating. You learn how during times of collective stress anxiety can develop in the collective body and each key player, pastor, leaders, members can somehow unknowingly take up a role in this interconnected emotional unit that reflects and regurgitates ways of being that they are familiar with from their own family system. We're so very lucky to have such a healthy system here but even we are not immune to stress, to burnout, to those feelings of anxiety that creep up, that make it all feel like it rests on each of our shoulders alone. You usually see this whenever there is a big and significant change looming. And well, we've got one of those.

And so what I'd tell you is, if you feel that maybe not now but in the future if it ever comes up for you is to listen to Paul. Listen to Kwaneta. For they are speaking a word of truth to us from their incarceration. They are both asking us to lay differences aside, to realize that the work we do is much bigger than the little things of day to day church life, and that is it really about what is true, noble, praiseworthy, lovely, pure, and right. That's what it's about. Being of the mind of Christ. The Christ who was put to death on a cross and who somehow by the power of God defeated death. I was actually reminded of that this week when Tennessee learned the lesson that even seven syringes and two fatal doses of phenobarbital is not enough to snuff out the life of a beloved child of God. That resurrection happens even when the state wants to prohibit it. That God is, I believe, sending us a message that we've managed to fail to listen to that capital punishment is disgusting and contrary to the heart of God. That is most absolutely is not of the mind of Christ who met the same fate, but managed to rise again and become something so much more grand and beautiful than anyone ever imagined.

So friends, keep the mind of Christ. That's what Paul demands of us. That's what Kwaneta asks of us. Because Paul and Kwaneta, each of them writing from prison, have the wisdom to know the main thing when they see it. The main thing isn't any of our little stuff, any of our anxieties, or our little conflicts, the main thing is the mission. It's keeping focus that for as much as our anxieties and our worries and our concerns and the stuff of life can creep into our system and our collective life together to focus on that which is true, lovey, pure, praiseworthy, excellent and admirable. And from where Paul and Kwaneta sit they can see that very clearly. They see clearly that communities such as this one than even the Texas Department of Correction cannot silence as much as they might like to, are places of resistance, places that equip disciples for service, that focus on that which is lovely and true—this, this is what is eternal, and it shines so brightly that a guy in a Roman prison or a woman in a solitary confinement in Texas can see it clearly. And so may we see what is before us just as clearly as they do.

May it be so.

Amen.

