

“The Good Work Begun In Us”

Scripture: Philippians 1:1-6

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This sermon is, in part, a good-bye for a while. If you are visitor among us, you may not know this church submitted a grant proposal to the Lilly Foundation—this congregation was one of over little over 100 congregations across the U.S. to be awarded such a grant this past year. The grant funds a sabbatical experience for the minister and congregation. The position of the Lilly Foundation is that long pastorates are either very healthy and good for a congregation or very difficult and hurtful for a congregation. Consider, for example, the Methodist Church: long pastorates are virtually unheard of. The District Superintendent moves pastors around: a major reason is that churches and ministers benefit. In the Lilly Foundation’s research, they have found that that one way to address the risks of long pastorate is to provide sabbaticals—a benefit for both the pastor and the congregation: both are rejuvenated, renewed, and refocused.

The average length of a pastorate is 6.7 years. I have been here over 16 and half years. The average life-time career of Presbyterian minister today is 17 years—average for a life time. I spent the average life time of Presbyterian minister in one congregation. And, looking at Oakland’s history, I have now been here as long as Alexander Martin, the first pastor of Oakland.

The preacher in me was tempted to go to some great farewell scene in Scripture: Moses’ departure before the people entered the Promised Land without him; Joshua’s stirring words at Shechem: “Choose this day whom you will serve, as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” There is grand farewell scene in Acts of Paul saying goodbye to the Ephesian elders. Then, of course, Jesus said “good-bye.”

Instead of a farewell scene, I want to share a thank you scene with you. I am going to do this in one of the best ways that I know how...just taking a Biblical text and working our way through it. The reading for today is the opening of Paul’s letter to the congregation in the Greek city of Philippi. He was their founding pastor...he had had regular contact with them. Now for the sake of the Gospel, Paul was apart from them under arrest. But this congregation had continued their support of Paul. They had sent both money and a person to help out. So Paul is writing a thank-you note.

*I Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,*

*To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:*

*<sup>2</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Unlike many of the other letters that we have of Paul, he does not describe himself as an apostle here but rather as a servant. That may not sound like much of a change but it is actually huge. In most of the other letters there is some conflict or question about whether Paul is an apostle: apostle is sort of like “right credentials.” Here Paul does not have play the “game” to tout his

pedigree: he is just a servant of Jesus Christ. After 16 and half years as one of the pastors here at Oakland, I aim to speak to you as one of the “servants of Jesus Christ.”

Paul writes to “the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi.” As it has often been noted, Paul calls every church member a “saint.” In many of his letters, he goes on to speak rather frankly about unsaintly conduct—not just of a moral kind but also of an unloving and factional divisiveness. Paul’s saints get bent out of shape—angry with him, disappointed with each other, and just unhappy! Their sainthood is clearly not found in them...but Paul writes to the saints *in Christ Jesus*. Dear friends and worshipers today, your sainthood is not in you...and it is certainly not in me. One my colleagues in ministry in a long-term pastorate had an officer once say to him: “Bob, I have always heard ministers say they were just ordinary people, nothing special. I just have never believed that until I got to know you.” Is that a compliment or critique? Many of you have gotten to know me and the Pender family—and no one is a petitioning the Vatican for a new saint!

Your sainthood...my sainthood...neither are in us. This status...this identity is only in Christ. How easily we get caught up in how people disappoint us, hurt us, neglect us! How easy to point to the unsaintliness in the midst of God’s people. Paul writes to those whose sainthood is not in themselves but in Christ. To the saints of Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church, our identity is not in us...it is in Christ.

Another day we will consider further what it means to be “in Christ.” But I personally keep returning to one of the grand statements of our Presbyterian or Reformed faith: The Heidelberg Catechism. The first question is this: What is your only comfort in life and death?

The answer:

That I am not my own but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. That’s what it means to be “in Christ”—in body and soul, in life and death, I belong to my faithful savior Jesus Christ. And this catechism answer goes on to say that all things work together for my salvation...not always for my personal happiness but always for my salvation. That is how we are saints in Christ.

Paul continues:

*<sup>3</sup> I thank my God every time I remember you, <sup>4</sup> constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, <sup>5</sup> because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. <sup>6</sup> I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.*

I hope to imitate Paul here: I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you. In his absence, Paul prays with thanksgiving for the joy of sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.

One concluding thought of Paul is this: I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. We have shared in ministry these past 16 years...sharing fits and starts of ministry. We are always in the middle of construction...a building, our staff, programs. It seems like we could put up a sign, "Excuse our Dust."

I ran into the words of Maurice Ashton the other day, who was reflecting on visiting the beautiful city of Sydney, Australia.

But every time I go there, there are ugly cranes and half-finished buildings, pavements torn up, huge holes being dug for new foundations and so on. Currently they are building the eastern bypass and the new underground railway to the airport. It looks like a giant wombat has been burrowing through the city. In the 35 years I have visited Sydney I have never seen the perfect city with everything just so. It is always under construction.<sup>1</sup>

In nearly seventeen years, I have never seen the perfect Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church. We are always under construction. Things that used to work no longer work...fail...get replaced...repairs are ongoing...new things emerge...the old neighborhood is not the same. And sometimes all we see is the debris, the obstacles, the detours, the delays, when all around us there is still such beauty.

Let me conclude with Paul's confidence: I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. The good work begun in us was not begun by me, by staff, by the Session, by any group in this church. The good work begun in us will be perfected and completed...but not in our schedule, not even in our life. The time ahead of us means "construction." We are not complete...not finished...and there yet. My time away will be constructive...your time with a temporary senior pastor will be constructive. May our confidence be in God who will complete the good work in us...may our sainthood be in Christ...and count on my prayers of thanksgiving for this congregation.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustrations\\_for\\_installment.asp?installment\\_id=3213](http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustrations_for_installment.asp?installment_id=3213)