

First Presbyterian Church
Philippians 1:1-18, “Love that Transforms from Start to Finish”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 5/10/2026

Transformation can feel like magic.

I still remember the feeling I had as a child
when I encountered my first transformer toy.
It was a bright red semi-truck with gleaming chrome details.
But with a few twists, turns, and flips,
the truck could be transformed into Optimus Prime,
the leader of a team of robots hiding in plain sight
through their transformational powers.

My young mind was blown.
A truck that can turn into a robot – not just in the cartoons,
but right here in my house.

On this special day we should note that
mothers are tremendous transformation agents.
Their bodies transform a tiny embryo into a child,
and their milk nourishes the child until it's able to feed itself.
I imagine most of us can identify other ways our mothers
transformed our lives over the years.

I wonder what you believe about transformation?
Can people—fully grown people—really change? Can you be transformed?
Or is it that, after childhood, we just are who we are, warts and all,
and we have to make the best of it?

Transformation can feel like magic – but Scripture tells us that it's not.
God's love is at work in us to produce dramatic transformation
that is real.
Best of all, it happens in relationship with one another.

We know from Act 16 that Paul founded the church in Philippi
with his mission team after God gave him a vision
of a man calling for help in Macedonia.

The team went to that region and entered the city of Philippi,
eventually finding a group of women who prayed together
down by the river.

This group became a church along with others from the town
who became followers of Jesus – including the jailer
who took Paul and Silas into his home.

But they weren't just a checkmark on the map of Paul's journeys.
They also became Paul's friends—
friends in a very uniquely transformative way, friends *in Christ*.

This letter was written to the church at Philippi
to help reinforce the theological vision of friendship in Christ
that was fundamental for Paul's understanding of transformation.

Ancient Roman letters always began with a section of thanksgiving,
and Paul's format follows suit.

But he uses the thanksgiving section to introduce important themes
that he wants to develop throughout his letter.

The first thing that Paul gives thanks for is the partnership in the gospel
that they share in.

In this phrase, Paul uses a word that has become
a famous catch-word for Christian friendship—it's the word, "koinonia."

It's translated partnership here, but could also be friendship or fellowship.

My former professor Gordon Fee notes in his lectures that the Greek
phrase Paul uses here emphasizes *the spread* of the gospel.

So this partnership is focused on transformation through the good news of Jesus.

When you have a friendship with someone
that's rooted in participating in the work of God,
it takes on new depth and new importance.

We're no longer just friends because we entertain each other,
or do nice things for each other.
We share in the work of transformation that God is doing
in us and in the world around.

I first really experienced this when I was in university
and my home church (FCG, Vancouver) started a Youth Intern program.

Many of the friends I had in high school
came back for the summer and we partnered together
to love those students and make the Bible come alive in their lives.
The conversations I had with those interns was exciting,
because our friendships weren't self-centered anymore,
they had a new focus through sharing in what God was doing.
We had crazy amounts of fun together and worked so hard together,
and – note this – we were changed. We came away from that experience
different people than we went into it.

The Service Learning Trips that the Mac Youth Collective does each year
lead to the same kind of relationships.
So that's the first element I want you to consider—are you partnering
with your friends who are Christians
in *furthering the good news*?

This doesn't need to be standing on a soapbox on 3rd Street.
You could do this by gathering support for people in need,
by praying together for people who are going through hard times,
by creating a space of hospitality and welcome for others,
or through any of our small groups or ministry teams here at the church.

But however you partner, you should be ready for God
to bring people into your life who challenge you to be transformed.
Sometimes that's because of their infectious love and encouragement.
Sometimes it's because their quite irritating and difficult.
God uses all of these things to aid in our transformation.

I believe that people *can* change deep down,
and when that change happens for the better,
God is at work in the heart of it.

Listen to what Paul says in v. 6.
He prays for the Philippian church with joy because he is confident of this:
**“that he who began a good work in you
will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”**

The “he” in that sentence is not Paul – it's God the Father.
(Now God is Spirit and has no gender, but the Bible was written in
a patriarchal society and presents God in line with those expectations.
So you can call God whatever you like, but in the Bible,
God is “he.”)

But all that to the side,
the point here is that a good work has begun and will one day be completed!
Do you know what that means? Transformation.

When we come to faith in God, something good and new is started within us.
It wasn't because of anything that we did,
and we aren't responsible for how it ends,
Thought we participate in the process all the way along,
the completion of that work is *God's responsibility*.
The new work is the new creation
that God began with the resurrection of Jesus.

Transformation is real. People do change. Communities change.
But the power behind that change is not something you have conjure up,
it comes from the Spirit of God who indwells you
and will fulfill God's purpose through you.
And the mechanism of the Spirit's transformation is *love*.
Love really is all you need!

Think about these words in verse 7,
**"It is right for me to feel this way about all of you,
since I have you in my heart and,
whether I am in chains or defending and confirming
the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me."**

Wherever Paul goes, and whatever Paul does—
if he's suffering or if he's fulfilling God's call on his life
this group of friends shares in God's grace with him.
How would you feel if someone said that about you?
Is there anyone you could say that about yourself?

It's a Jesus infused version of the sentiment expressed
when a person carries around a locket with a photo inside of it—
you are with me wherever I go, and whatever I do.

But that's not the most amazing thing that Paul says about affection here.
In verse 8, he takes it deeper,
**"God can testify how I long for all of you
with the affection of Christ Jesus."**

The word translated, "affection" here literally refers to a person's internal organs,
their...entrails.

The last characteristic I want to consider is the DEEPLY INFORMED LOVE
that Paul prays for the Philippians in verse 9,
**"And this is my prayer: that your love may abound
more and more in knowledge and depth of insight."**

Have you ever thought of your love as abounding *in knowledge*?

That's kind of a foreign concept for me.

We don't usually incorporate characteristics of intelligence
when we talk about love—

love in our society is something that you feel,
something that you are carried away by,
something that is experienced in the moment!

But Paul calls the Philippians to a smart kind of love,
a love that is insightful and cogent.

And there is a deep need for this kind of love in our lives.

All too often we settle for love that... wants good things for people,
love that makes us feel things we like to feel,
love that fits into the easy category of "being nice".

But such love is simply shallow, ignorant, and naïve.

Love like that will not change anybody's life,
and it won't call you to change yours.

Shallow love will not enable you to carry on in a straight line
through great difficulties—instead it will pull you like water
to the places of least resistance,
and you'll wonder how it was that you got in that place.

You'll wonder where your friends are when you really need them.

Christian friendship requires the infusion of knowledge and insight into our love.

Which means it enables us to see the world more clearly,
to avoid the idolatry of our day, and to have moral insight
into the life of right-relatedness that Jesus invites us into.

That is the kind of abundant love that Paul prays for this church to share in.

That's the kind of love that *koinonia* moves us towards.

Think about the spaces where you connect with other people of faith,
and ask yourself, "*Are we growing in such a way that our love
abounds more and more in knowledge and depth of insight?*"

We are made for relationships that challenge us, support us, encourage us,
and transform us our whole lives —

until the good work begun in us is brought to completion.