



**Mennonite
Church
Canada**

Resource Centre

Sermon

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What if Love Prevailed?

Sometime ago, I received an email from a member of my congregation—at least, that’s what I thought it was when I saw his name in the inbox on my computer. But when I opened his email and started reading, I soon realized that I was reading a message clearly meant for someone else. What had happened was that his computer had a virus, and it was taking bits of old emails that he had sent in the last week or two and sending those bits to other people in his address book. That’s how I ended up reading someone else’s mail.

Reading the book of Philippians is a bit like that—it’s really reading someone else’s mail. Because the book of Philippians is a letter—written to a particular group of people at a particular time and place. It’s not addressed directly to Mennonite Church Canada for July 13, 2003. It doesn’t say “to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in St. Catharines.”

And yet this letter is clearly also for us. It’s no mistake or computer virus. We don’t need to stop reading the way I stopped reading that message sent to me in error. Even though centuries have passed since this letter of Philippians was first written, even though we live in a very different time and place, this letter speaks to us also today.

After all, just like the Philippian church, we also are living between the first day that we heard the gospel and the coming day of Jesus Christ. We’re living in that same already-but-not-yet period of time. Like them, we also share in God’s grace. Like them, our ultimate end is for the glory and praise of God.

And just like the Philippian church, we also face significant challenges. They faced the challenge of false teachers who denied the cross and opposed their faith—Philippians 1:28 warns the Philippians not to be intimidated by these opponents. We also might be intimidated by the many different voices, the many different opinions we face in our world today.

In the Philippian church, people were not always of the same mind—even co-workers who had worked closely side by side needed help with a disagreement. Within Mennonite Church Canada, we also may have our differences—in styles of worship, in our view of the church, in our understanding of sexuality, in our understanding of Scripture. Even when we all speak English, the very same words in the same language don’t mean the same things to all of us.

In their own day, the Philippian church needed to discern the best and most important from the not so important things. We also need discernment in doing what’s best and most important—as

Mennonite Church Canada, as area conferences and local congregations, as households and individuals. What are our priorities today and tomorrow, and how will we discern these?

Now as then, the church is to be pure and blameless, producing a harvest of righteousness through Jesus Christ. That was true for the Philippian church, and it's true for us today.

But how do we get there? How do we get the love, the knowledge, the full insight for the challenges we face today? To be the church today? To bring glory and praise to God today and tomorrow?

If Philippians is an example for us, the first thing we need to do is pray. The letter itself has 4 chapters addressing the various challenges faced by the young church. But before addressing the issue of false teachers in Philippians chapter 3, before talking about the problem between Euodia and Syntyche in Philippians chapter 4—in the opening verses of this letter, the apostle Paul first offers a prayer. This opening prayer wasn't only a convention of good New Testament letter writing. It wasn't only a ritual to get out of the way before getting to the really important stuff. But this prayer came from his joy and thankfulness for the church, and from his confidence that God was at work among them: “this is my prayer,” says Philippians 1:9, “that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight.”

Like Paul to the Philippian church, we also would do well to begin with such a prayer for our church today. What if love prevailed? Well, what if God's people prayed for Mennonite Church Canada with such joy and thanks and confidence in God? Could we pray like that in our local congregations? Could we pray like that in our own homes, in our own hearts?

In the letter to the Philippians, this prayer is for love to “overflow more and more.” It's not asking for something entirely new, for something that had been missing. After all, the Philippians had already expressed their love for God and for others in many ways—by reaching out and sharing the good news of Jesus, by sending Epaphroditus with a gift to help cover Paul's needs in prison, by their worship and faithfulness to God. Their love was already flowing—yet it could OVERflow more and more.

In the same way, for Mennonite Church Canada today, love for God and others is not something new. It's already flowing—in mission across the street and around the world, in worship in this setting and in our many local congregations

across Canada. In recent years, we've been talking about being a “missional” church. The word may be new, and may bring a new emphasis, but the idea was there long before. In the same way, love has already been part of the church's experience and expression, but this prayer gives it a new emphasis. We can build on the love that is already there, grow on that, so love flows and OVERflows more and more.

Now back when I was growing up, there was a popular song that said “all you need is love.” But here in Philippians, this prayer is about love “with knowledge and full insight.” This isn't love in the sense of anything goes. This isn't love only as intense emotion. This is love rooted in knowing God. This is love also informed by insight. This is also the kind of love we need today.

In Philippians, this prayer is for the whole church. The letter is addressed to “all the saints...in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.” And in the first section of the letter, every time the word you appears it's a plural you—meaning the whole church. Not just one individual. Not just the bishops and deacons who were the leaders of the church. But all the saints were included.

In the same way, when we read about “your” love overflowing, to help “you” determine what is best, so “you” may be pure and blameless—these words are for the whole church. Not only for those with leadership responsibilities. Not only for those of us here as representatives of our particular local congregations and area conferences. But for the whole church together—in Abbotsford, British Columbia where I'm from, in Toronto United Lao Church, in Winkler Manitoba, or wherever we are.

There is no separate secret knowledge only for pastors and leaders, or only for those who grew up Mennonite, or only for those who are over 30, or under 30. Growing in love and knowledge and insight is for the whole church.

Now for this Assembly, the question “what if...” has been cast in the direction of dreaming, of imagining the future. It's a rich exercise. But “what if” is not only the language of wonderful possibility. At times, “what if” is also the language of fear.

What if love does not prevail? What if when we try to love our enemies, they respond by taking advantage of us? What if when we try to love our neighbors as ourselves, we end up being rejected and hurt? What if the concern for unity results in lack of respect for individuals? What if diversity in the church becomes division? Where there is great opportunity and great possibility, there is also often risk and fear.

The Philippian church knew that in a special way. Philippians 1:29-30 says that they had “the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well.” Their great possibility was the privilege of faith in Jesus and following him. But the flip side of that was suffering for him as well. They were enduring the same struggle that Paul himself was going through.

And so the apostle reminds them in his opening words of this letter, that God is the one who had begun a good work among them and will bring it to completion. This assurance was so important that it was repeated in the second chapter of Philippians verse 13: “for it is God who is at work in you.”

In the same way, whatever risks and fears we may face in our own time, we also may find confidence in God because God is at work in us and through us: to make us a missional church; to make us a people who can celebrate diversity in unity; with love overflowing more and more with knowledge and full insight.

Are we there yet? No—we’re still living between the first day we heard the gospel and the coming day of Jesus Christ. We’re still in that already-but-not-yet time. We’re still celebrating the Lord’s

Supper—until he comes. The day of Jesus Christ is not yet. In the meantime, for this day and the days ahead, our challenge as local churches and as Mennonite Church Canada, is for all of us to continue in prayer, in love flowing and overflowing in knowledge and insight, with confidence in God’s work among us and through us.

And so—in the spirit of this letter to the Philippians, let us join together in prayer.

Prayer:

O God of grace, peace, and love, God of the Philippian church and our God today, we give you thanks as we remember the congregations of Mennonite Church Canada—those represented in this gathering and those worshipping in many different ways and languages across the country. We give you thanks with joy that we share together in the good news of Jesus. Help us to hold one another in our hearts and to be faithful in praying for one another. Help us to build on the love, knowledge, and insight that is already among us that it might flow freely and overflow. For we are your field, your building. So grow in us, build us through Jesus Christ for your glory and praise. **Amen.**