INTRODUCTION

The other day I was talking with a mother who was telling me about her college-age son. She's proud of him for many of his characteristics. He still lives at home, but he's held a job since he was 16, and his mom really appreciates that her son helps pay his way in life. She says he's a pretty good cook, so he's learning independence that way. But then the mother started telling me about some of her son's less mature characteristics—like leaving a mess in the kitchen and not cleaning up his bedroom. She regularly tells him, "Do you think your future wife is going to find these traits attractive? It's great that you can do some things well, son, but you know, a girlfriend will be looking for the whole package." The mother was thinking about her son's future transitions. Would he be successful when he didn't have his mom around anymore, picking up his stinky socks and washing his dirty dishes?

Every mother and father worries about their children's readiness to face life without parental supervision and assistance. I guess, in a way, that's what the Apostle Paul was wondering about the Christian believers at Philippi. Paul was writing to them from prison, possibly in Caesarea or Rome. The relatively new Christians in Philippi were like his adolescent children. They had come to faith under his nurturing, but now they were having to figure out how to be Christians without him being there. Paul would soon be sending Epaphroditus as a substitute guide. But Paul also wanted to write them this letter to make sure they would be OK in his absence.
I chose this scripture for today because this is my last time to preach to you. After the all-music worship service next Sunday, we'll be saying our good-byes. Then, on June 18, the James family will be heading west to Ogden, Utah, and you'll have to get along without me. So, let's dig into Philippians chapter two and see what you might need to do in my absence.

1. **WORK OUT YOUR SALVATION WITH GOD**

   The first piece of advice Paul gave the Philippians--and I, in turn, pass on to you--is "work out your salvation with God." In verse 12, Paul emphasizes our individual responsibility to work out our own salvation by obedience motivated by fear and trembling. Some very smart and faithful people might object to that as "works righteousness." If you know any theological history, you might be aware that Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s were opposed to the idea that people had to earn their way to heaven. But before you get too busy protesting, notice what Paul writes in verse 13. There he says that "it is God who works in you to will and to act according to God's good purpose." So it isn't really up to us to work out our salvation all by ourselves. We've got God working in us, helping us--if we will allow God to do so.

   Of course, it's important that we give our faith every effort that we can muster. As the book of James says, "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (2: 17). If we say we're sorry for our sins, but keep repeating them, are we really sorry? If we say we believe in God's forgiving love, but then keep on acting in bitter hatred, are we really recipients of God's mercy? If we say we are Christ's followers, but then act in ways that are judgmental and harsh, have we really found salvation? Paul and James are right. How we behave really does matter.

   But Paul is also right in saying that God is working in us and with us. The Apostle wrote it most clearly in Ephesians 2:8-10, where he said, "For by grace you have been saved through
faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God--not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

Do you get this message? In Paul's absence, he hoped that the Philippians would obey the will of God, which was already at work within them. In my absence, I hope the same for you. Don't be spiritual slackers. Get busy doing what we United Methodists all promise when we join the church: to practice our faith through prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. Don't let God's gift of faith to you waste away from lack of use. Be intentional about your spiritual growth and disciplines. Claim God's help to exercise your spiritual muscles every day. In my absence, please continue to work out your salvation with God.

2. DO EVERYTHING WITHOUT COMPLAINING OR ARGUING

A second thing Paul hoped for the Philippians, and I hope for you in my absence, is that you will "do everything without complaining or arguing." In verses 14 through 16, Paul goes on to say that, if the Philippians would avoid complaining and arguing, they would then be blameless and pure and they would shine like stars in the universe. Of course, that doesn't mean that members of the church can't have a vigorous discussion and debate once in a while. Nor does it mean that everyone will agree about everything. But, if we treat each other with respect, that's when the church is strong enough to hold out what Paul calls "the word of life."

Let me be frank with you. For the past 14 years, we have talked over and over again in this church about how we want to reach younger people and grow and be vital. But when new people actually come into the church, what if they hear arguing and complaining? What if they hear grousing and put-downs? What if they hear people making judgmental statements? For the most part, this Wesley congregation is incredibly warm, loving, and welcoming to people in all
different kinds of life situations. I've been very proud of you for that. But like a rotten apple or a rotten potato, all it takes is one to spoil the whole batch. One unkind or mean-spirited person can drive many others away. This can happen even if the one speaking negativity does it under the pretense of a joke and with a smile on his or her face.

When you interact with other members and visitors in this congregation, negative and harsh comments don't help you personally or the Wesley United Methodist Church to appear blameless and pure. And, if you go out in the community and make unpleasant remarks about other church members, you certainly aren't going to help the church shine like a star in the universe. Instead, it will be more like giving it a black eye. If you value this church, then stop doing things that hurt its vitality and well-being. Stop impeding its ability to hold out the word of life to others. If you care about this congregation, then, please, in my absence, do everything without complaining or arguing.

3. WELCOME MY FELLOW WORKER

Paul wrote a third piece of wisdom to the Christian believers in Philippi that is useful for us today. In verses 25-30, Paul told them, and I pass along to you: In my absence, welcome my fellow worker. As I said earlier, Paul was in prison, possibly in Caesarea or Rome. That's why he couldn't visit the Philippians in person. What Paul could do at that time was send his fellow worker Epaphroditus to them. Epaphroditus had nearly died doing the work of Christ there with Paul, but Epaphroditus had now become well enough that he could travel to Philippi and assist with the congregation there. So, in this letter, Paul urged the Philippians to accept and welcome Epaphroditus, whom Paul described as a brother and fellow soldier in Christ.

Likewise, I urge you, in my absence, to welcome my fellow worker, Rev. Emilie Forward who will arrive here July 9. Emilie comes to Wesley with many years of experience as a pastor.
For the past six years, she has served the Avondale United Methodist Church, and before that she served several different congregations in Michigan. Emilie grew up in Germany, where the Catholic Church told her that she could only be a nun. But once in the United States as an adult, Emilie became a United Methodist and followed God's call into pastoral ministry.

No doubt there will be things that Rev. Emilie will do differently than the way I have done them. That may seem strange to you for a while, and might require some adjustment on your part. But I'm sure you'll also, rather quickly, find many things that Rev. Emilie does that you'll like very much. I'm quite sure that Rev. Emilie's faith in God is strong and that you will see God leading her as she leads you.

So, my dear congregation, please receive Rev. Emilie with open arms, smiles, and great joy. Honor her calling from God, her educational preparation, and the credentials she has earned through her work in the United Methodist Church. Respect her wisdom gained through pastoral and life experience. Pray for her, assist her, and communicate clearly what your needs and expectations are, so she won't have to spend her time and energy guessing. Make space and grace for her personality and style to come through. Be delighted in the gifts and perspectives she will bring to this ministry. And be willing to go where she wants to take you, as Rev. Emilie Forward leads you forward. In other words, in my absence, please welcome my fellow worker.

CONCLUSION

We don't know if the Apostle Paul ever made it back to Philippi. Tradition says that Paul died by execution in Rome, so he probably didn't. But, no doubt, he held the Philippians in his heart, as I will also hold you in my heart and hope that you will be OK—even in my absence.