



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **Whatever Is True**

Philippians 4:1-9

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Paul's letters are...not my favorite. I feel like preachers aren't supposed to have favorites in the Bible. There's even a saying in the Bible about that: all Scripture is God breathed and worthy for instruction. But that quotation comes from—one of Paul's letters which—again—are not my favorite. My favorite? The Gospel of Mark, which is full of enigmatic stories and the central through line of which is something that scholars call the messianic secret. That's pretty good! Paul's letters, not so full of mystery, not so full of secrets. Paul is raising questions and then definitively answering those questions; where's the fun in that? You know, preaching-wise?

And the reason, I think, is who the letters are addressed to. That is critically important: who is the audience? That's captured even in the names of these letters. The Book of Philippians is called that because the audience is the church in Philippi. Romans? The church in Rome. First and Second Corinthians? Corinth. (Guess they didn't get it the first time!) It matters deeply who is reading these letters. It matters deeply why Paul is writing to them in the first place—you don't have to read farther than the names of the Books to see that.

What they all have in common--Romans, Corinthians, Philippians, Thessalonians, Galatians--what they all have in common is that Paul is writing to people who are already Christians. The goal of these letters is not to inform people of the good news of Jesus Christ. They have already heard the good news. They have already become part of a church. They are already believers. So what do you say to a group of people who are faithful, who are the church, who are striving to live as God as revealed in Jesus Christ wants them to live?

Well, it kind of depends. It is critically important who is the audience. The church in Corinth may or may not need to hear the same guidance as the church in Rome, which may or may not need the guidance the folks in Corinth need. This is why so much interpretive real estate is spent trying to figure out what was going on in the historical record, to understand what were the circumstances that gave rise to Paul writing to the church in the first place. It can be very difficult, a process of reading between the lines, consulting multiple different external sources, learning several ancient languages. It can be hard!

But for the Book of Philippians? It is not hard at all. Because Paul explains very clearly why he is writing, and the reason is super easy to understand. Paul is writing to say thank you.

He was in jail—where exactly is not super clear, Paul got arrested a lot. So the best that scholars could do is narrow it down to a short list; it's not totally clear. What was clear is that Paul was in jail and he was writing to the church in Philippi to thank them for having sent him food and money and support so that his imprisonment would not be miserable or even deadly. He is writing to say thank you because Philippi supported him in a deeply challenging time and it made all the difference. We know that is what the Book of Philippians is about because Paul just out and says it. He is writing to say thank you because Philippi supported him in a deeply challenging time and it made all the difference

It is a thank-you note. One of, if not the most, famous thank-you note of all time. The message is thank you and please keep on doing what you've been doing. Not super complicated.

And even though the letters of Paul are not my favorite, this passage today is simply so, so right for me to preach on for my last sermon as lead pastor here at First United. Because Paul had two things to say: thank you for your support in a challenging time, and keep on doing what you've been doing. And those are the two things that I have to say as well.

The past four years have been a deeply challenging time, and I'm speaking here personally. Deeply challenging of course because of the pandemic. Pastoring during the COVID-19 pandemic was hands-down the hardest thing I've ever had to do as a minister. The tools and skills I've spent 15 years developing—those were suddenly out the window. Sitting down face-to-face to have deep and holy conversations? Well, how would I feel about having those as part of the longest-running episode of Hollywood Squares ever made? Preaching in a gathered body where the faces and names and stories of the faithful are right in front of me? Well, how do I feel about talking to my phone in whatever the least noisy part of my house happens to be while also trying to cover remote preschool? Holding someone's hand as they grieve a loved one's death, taking the bread of life in my hand and offering it face-to-face to one seeking a taste of grace. What if all of that was just...gone for years. These years have deeply challenged me to change everything about how I pastor, and without fail I found that you, First United, you supported those faltering and experimental efforts. Thank you. Thank you to all the members who dialed in on YouTube. Thank you to the choir of Bills. Thank you to the choir of the choir juggling earbuds and a capella. Thank you to the Public Health Task Force who worked to find balance between the need for gathering and the need for safety when the stakes

were...the stakes are not what I am accustomed to weighing. Thank you to my colleagues Lydia and Alicia who were fellow workers in the vineyard of the Gospel in the hardest years I've ever known. Lydia with brilliant and beautiful video worship, Alicia with organizational acumen that kept a frankly daunting litany of details looked after. Thank you. Sallie Smylie, and Gene Armstrong, and Carl Nauert, and Tim Dull and Marteki Reed—they were the Council Leadership Team over the pandemic years. I could not have done this without you. And I'm not sure I would have even had the guts to try, without you. Thank you, what you've done for the church. Thank you.

Thank you for supporting me in a deeply challenging time. It made all the difference. Just as it did for Paul. Thank you was the first thing he said to the church in Philippi. And the second was keep on doing what you have been doing. Paul said it better, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable: if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing them.

It is a risk to do individual shout-outs because I know that I will leave out so many. This is an inclusive but not exhaustive list: Chibuike Enyia and Susan Buchanan, keep on doing what you are doing at the Village Board table. First United cares deeply about democracy and we are all proud to be part of this gathered body with you. Anne Koerber, keep on doing what you are doing with the Deacons, yes, but I mean when you lead worship and you share with this congregation God's gift to you of tears, the way your heart is wide open and welcomes us to open our hearts, too. Joanne Despotos, keep on doing what you are doing, showing up to church week after week and bringing with you always one of the faithful who needs help getting here. Keep on doing what you are doing, all of the whole congregation. The congregation as it stands today is the most diverse that I have seen it. Diversity of race and age and gender expression and faith expression. Divided times like these make this diversity a marvel; keep on doing what you are doing and more, and more, and more. Carol and Dale Porfilio, keep on doing what you are doing, opening your hearts to your fellow members, opening your home to help community grow over casseroles and roasts and the breaking of bread, where the body of Christ is made known in the breaking of bread. Keep on doing what you are doing. Tara Dull and Sandy Jefferson and Kathy Pederson, keep on doing what you are doing with your care for asylum seekers. Lura Honderich, Megan Aeschleman, Katie O Shea, Nicole and Kelly Cerniglia, you who grew up in this church and stand now leading with joy and creativity the very programming that formed you—keep on doing what you are doing.

I know that there is so much I haven't acknowledged, so many whose faith is lived out beautifully, graciously, lovingly, whatever. Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable: if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing them. And the God of peace will be with you.

Thanks be to God.