

“A Vision for the Church: Loving with Insight”  
Philippians 1:1-11  
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“Are you guys ready? Let’s roll.” Four years ago today, an act of horrifying terrorism knocked America to our knees. I will never forget: I was sitting at the kitchen table watching “Good Morning America” when the first plane crashed into the World Trade Center ... and then, minutes later, another plane sliced into the second tower. Stunned, we watched people jump to their deaths as the smoke billowed out of the buildings. Soon we learned that another plane had crashed into the Pentagon. This attack was impeccably planned and ruthlessly executed, aimed to take down the symbols of our commerce and the center of our defense. And it could have been worse. A fourth plane was aimed at the heart of our democracy, most likely at the White House. Instead, it crashed in rural Pennsylvania. Why? Not because of any government intervention, but because a few ordinary guys on that plane took it on themselves to ambush the hijackers and avert further disaster. We know a few of their names: Jeffrey Glick, 31, a sales manager for a tech firm; Tom Burnett, 38, a California businessman; Mark Bingham, 31, a former college rugby player from California; and Todd Beamer, a 32 year old husband and father, an executive at Oracle. Beamer’s words to these men are those we’ll forever associate with the courage of that day: “Are you guys ready? Let’s roll.” ([www.post-gazette.com/headlines/20010916phonecallnat3p3.asp](http://www.post-gazette.com/headlines/20010916phonecallnat3p3.asp))

Today, another crisis rocks our nation. This attack was random; an act of nature, erratic and uncontrollable. Yet it was just as ruthlessly executed by Hurricane Katrina, and the devastation is horrific. Hundreds if not thousands of lives are gone; hundreds of thousands of households displaced, a whole region in ruins, a whole city nearly wiped off the map. We have been as glued to our televisions now as we were on 9/11, not because we are mesmerized by the

unfolding disaster, but because at the core of our common humanity, we feel ourselves connected to the suffering of our fellow-citizens, and we want to be part of their healing. We feel helpless – perhaps we even feel angry – but even more, we feel compassion, because we deeply care.

As I start my ministry among you today, I had intended to share with you my vision for the church. Based on Paul’s brief letter to the Philippians, this four-part series focuses on how God is calling us to grow, to become stronger and more vigorous in our faith. Paul dearly loved his congregation in Philippi, and his tenderness and insight seemed especially appropriate for the beginning of our ministry together. But now, I must confess, his words have taken on an *urgency* for me. I am convinced that the Lord is calling on us to step up to the plate, and we simply must focus ourselves utterly on *his* designs on our purpose. So let me begin with the fervent prayer that Paul shares for his beloved church; for it has become my prayer as well, for this, *our* beloved congregation: “This is my prayer,” Paul says: “that your love may overflow more and more, with keen wisdom and confident insight, so that you discern for yourselves what is really of value. *Then* you will have produced that harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, for the glory and praise of God.”

Now there’s a lot in this prayer, not quite as reducible as the rap I prepared for the children’s time. I could go on forever with the nuances of the Greek terms alone ... but lucky for you, I’ll spare you. Still, let me take it apart just a little, or better said, let me turn it like a gemstone for the prayer’s facets to shine. Bear with me.

First, Paul prays that our love may overflow more and more. The starting point and ending point of what we need is love; for the center of Christ’s teaching is to love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, and then to love our neighbors as ourselves. Love is, in fact, essential.

So this keen feeling of compassion – this *visceral* desire we share to love those in distress right now – it is the core expression of faith that Paul prays will grow and flourish. There is nothing sentimental about it; for I am convinced that the force of love can bear down on the Gulf coast with the same ferocity as the storm that decimated it. Nevertheless, it is not so much the *feeling* of love, not just the *passion* of love that Paul prays will multiply; rather, it is the *commitment* of love, the *carefulness* of love that Paul so urgently desires. And for that, we must use not just our hearts, but our heads.

It's a curious thing, for in our culture love and thought are not often paired with one another. Yet in Paul's prayer that the church's love grows, he uses the language of *thinking* over and over and over again. Honestly, the New Revised Standard translation can't do it justice: "I pray that your love will overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best." Even when I take a stab at my own translation I can't touch it: "I pray that your love grows richer and richer in *confident* knowledge and *complete* discernment, so that you are able to *figure out for yourselves what is valuable*" ...or, "I pray that your love grows stronger and stronger in *moral* insight and *the capacity* to discern ... so that you can *critically examine things, and hang on with total clarity to the things that really matter.*"

*That* is how love grows. Through the hard work of discernment, the sifting through the cultural norms of what is good and what is not, of hanging on for dear life to those things of lasting value and letting go of the rest without a second thought. *That* is moral maturity. And it's the kind of thinking that we must do here, and in our homes when our kids are testing the limits, and in our offices when we're faced with a tough call, and in our day-to-day values, whether we're buying a car or comforting a friend or writing a check for charity.

Finally, Paul's vision for the church, and my own prayer for you, is centered on Jesus Christ, and our trust in *him*. Christian faith is not an exercise in self-help. It is an exercise in trust: a trust, as Paul says, "that the one who began a good work in us will bring it to completion" (1:6). We are not in this alone. For it is Christ himself who "produces the harvest of righteousness" in us, for the glory and praise of God.

This is my prayer for you, Paul says to his beloved congregation in Philippi; and as I begin my ministry among you, whom I am already coming to love, this is my prayer for you as well: "That your love may grow more and more, in confident knowledge and complete discernment, so you can unshakably determine what is really valuable, through the power of Christ for the glory of God." My bet is that some of you are there already; there are "saints" in every congregation. But my bet is also that many of us have some distance to go before our faith is up to the challenges ahead of us these days.

I know that for myself, the mainline church's expectation of faith has become over the years what could only charitably called "anemic." A brand new study has confirmed what I have, in my heart, been afraid of. In a massive survey of 3,000 U.S. households with teenagers – supplemented by 267 face-to-face interviews -- two researchers concluded that the dominant contemporary Christian expression that our young people are picking up from us is a far cry from the muscular faith our times demand. The contrast between what we *think* we're passing along and what we're *really* passing along could not be more stark. This isn't because our youth programs are wanting – it's because our young people serve as the litmus test, the "canary in the coal mine" for the vigor of our faith. One reviewer puts it this way: "Religious traditions understand themselves as presenting a truth revealed by a holy and almighty God who calls

human beings from a self-centered focus to a life of serving God and neighbor. ... But according to [the researchers], teens understand religion to be something quite different: religion helps them make good life choices and helps them to be happy. ‘The *de facto* dominant religion ...,’ the authors explain, ‘is what we might well call ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.’ The ‘creed’ of this religion [includes these points]:

\*God wants people to be good, nice and fair to each other ....

\*The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.

\*God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.”

(Carol E. Lytch, *Christian Century*, September 6, 2005, reviewing Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

Frankly, this isn’t going to cut it for the challenges ahead.

Friends, what we need now more than ever is mature faith, vital faith, vigorous faith. What we need is the kind of faith in which *love* grows strong – love for God and love for neighbor. What we need is the kind of faith in which *thinking* happens constantly – hard thinking, the work of discernment, the tough job of figuring out what really matters and what *really* does not. What we need right now is the kind of faith that *trusts* the Lord, that leans hard on the confidence that we’re not in this murky universe alone, the kind of faith that hurls itself into the holy and sacred and ultimate purpose of giving glory to God who has given us life itself.

This is the “harvest of righteousness” Jesus is looking for. And he’s looking for it to happen in *us*.

Beloved in Christ, we are faced with a choice. We, and the rest of the mainline American church, can settle for “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” and live for ourselves, for our next bonus, our next grade, our next invitation, or even at our best, our next opportunity to be good, nice and fair to each other, to be happy and to feel good about ourselves. This is what our culture offers. Or we can live for the glory of God. This is what Jesus delivers. You pick.

There’s one heck of a lot of work to be done ... not just in New Orleans but all over the world. There’s a famine in Darfur and an AIDS epidemic throughout Africa. And here on our doorstep, there are hungry children to feed, and lonely shut-ins to visit, and families who are struggling to know how to stay together and young people who want to know that there’s a sacred, holy purpose to their lives. And our church is already up to its eyeballs trying to do these things. I am *so* impressed with what goes on here.

But it’s never clearer than at times like these we need every single one of us to be leaders – moral leaders – who have an enormous capacity to love ... who are smart and wise and savvy to what matters and what doesn’t ... who are ready to step up to the plate and do what is right for the children of God, trusting that Christ is in there with us, our mentor, our strength, our spirit, our guide. I fervently believe that you and I are being called to this purpose; that this is Christ’s vision for us and our church in this day. And I swear that it’s Jesus himself that we hear, asking *us* now: “Are you guys ready? *Are you guys ready?* Let’s roll.” Amen.