

Philippians 1:3-11  
June 21, 2009

South Plains

this sanctuary today, but in homes and hospital rooms around the world.

### Sweat Equity In The Gospel

The little boy in me has always been fascinated by “Gunga Din” and “The Jungle Book.” Maybe it’s because Kipling’s rhymes are usually simple:

East is East, and West is West, and never the  
twain shall meet,

Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great  
judgment seat.

Rudyard Kipling won the Nobel Peace Prize for literature in 1907. He was so immensely popular that a reviewer gushed that the words flowing from his pen were worth a shilling apiece. A couple of college students read that review and decided that such exaggeration deserved to be tested. They wrote the great man a letter in which they said, “They say your words are worth a shilling apiece. Enclosed please find one shilling. Send us your best word.” Kipling kept the shilling and wrote back his answer: “Thanks.”

The virtue of gratitude, the ability to say “thank you” sincerely and spontaneously is surely one of the most important and basic character traits a person can have. I want to dedicate these baby caps, teddy bears, gowns and blankets as an expression of thanks – our thanks to God, a thanksgiving that resounds not only in

All but one of Paul’s letters in the New Testament begin with a word of thanks. The great missionary is thanking his supporters by writing them a letter. In typical Pauline fashion, it’s not just a thank-you note. It’s a letter re-dedicating their sweat equity in the gospel. Paul gave the gospel. They gave him support. Paul’s words become an act of worship, rehearsing the generosity of the Philippians as a reflection of God’s grace so that everything they have done together can work toward divine purposes.

Most of the letters you and I write today are pretty narrow and focused. We write to a single person in order to accomplish a simple job before they are tossed in the round file or cyberspace. Our 21<sup>st</sup> century written words are cheap and disposable. Not so in Paul’s day. Writing on parchment was laborious. A letter had to be hand-carried from the writer to the recipient. There were no other means of direct communication over long distances – no telephones or email. Letters were treasured. Therefore Paul expected his letter would be read aloud more than once when the Philippian Christians gathered for worship. His words would become part of the liturgy: praise and prayer and instruction meant to shape the lives of Christians. Paul knows this so he loads it generously with encouragement we still hear in worship today:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God....

This is my prayer...to help you....

For the glory and praise of God....

Gratitude is such a generic, yet uncommon virtue, that it marks the threshold between barbarism and civilization, between childishness and adulthood, between arrogance and grace. Ungrateful people are not much fun to be around. On the other hand, sincere gratitude covers a multitude of sorrows.

The Garth family has had at least two very memorable Florida vacations, for which we are eternally grateful, although for different reasons. Once vacation came to us as a gift after the death of a parishioner named Julia. Julia's nephew, whom we had never met, insisted that we take our four rowdy children and spend a week at his luxurious beach house on Amelia Island off the Atlantic coast. It was delightful respite after a difficult winter. The nephew was grateful to the church and we were grateful for his generosity. Everyone's grief was assuaged just a little by those feelings of gratitude. His gift strengthened the fond memories I have of Julia's friendship.

The other vacation came at an even more critical moment for our family. We were living in Florida. Debby and I were worn out that fall from work and from four active children who ranged in age from one to eight. The

holidays were coming and I would have to spend them working at least 12 hours a day from Christmas Eve to New Year's Day. When a friend said he knew someone who would be glad to lend us their beach house on the Gulf Coast over Thanksgiving, we could not believe our ears. A long weekend at the beach seemed idyllic. It was not.

We drove six hours with four children and a large Labrador retriever to find a dirty little house with a stopped up toilet in the bathroom and foul water coming from the kitchen tap. The weather was windy and cold. After two miserable nights, we climbed in the Volkswagen van to drive six hours back across Florida. Thankfully the children and the dog fell asleep after dark.

I cannot really blame the Florida Highway Patrol for pulling us over. In those days, with the windows piled high in the VW bus with baggage, we must have fit the description of drug-runners. The officer cautioned Debby to stay inside the vehicle while he walked around the van shining his magnum flashlight through the windows, waking up the dog and disturbing the kids. I knew exactly what he was looking for, and I had visions of six Garths and the dog standing on the side of Interstate 10 while our baggage was unloaded in the rain. Gratitude, pure unadulterated gratitude is what I felt when he waved us back on the highway without another word.

The Apostle Paul was not so lucky. He was under house arrest when the church at Philippi sent gifts to the

prisoner. Paul did not know what the outcome would be any more than we knew what the Highway Patrol would do with us that night. So when he got words and gifts of encouragement, he was grateful. Their gifts reminded him of their friendship and support in a very tangible way, easing his imprisonment, strengthening his resolve, and affirming his ministry.

We can be sure that these garments, made with such love, will have a similar effect on parents whose children have been confined to a hospital ward. When Pam Ator came to South Plains from the Medical Benevolence Foundation this spring, we were eager to ask her about the need for baby caps and teddy bears and such. We've been happy to supply them, but we needed to know they are still needed.

Pam smiled and reminded us of the relief and joy of a new mother when a newborn is released from the hospital. She described how the nurses snug a cap on the baby's head because even in a tropical climate, newborns must be kept warm. They bundle the little one with a blanket or a new gown, perhaps a teddy bear, so that the mother leaves the hospital with her arms full. Especially in a developing country, a woman can see that these items bear the marks of loving hands. Somewhere in this wide world, another woman thought about her baby. Perhaps a husband or a child stuffed that bear with love. The shared effort encourages and affirms our share in the gospel of love.

There's striking synchronicity between the words of Kipling and the ideas of St. Paul. Kipling reminds us that:

East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,

Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great judgment seat.

Sometimes it seems that the poverty of the developing world and our prosperity will never meet till the end of time. Kipling sensed that gulf as well as anyone. But, he also knew that cultural and economic chasm was to be bridged at "God's great judgment seat." That is exactly the hope St. Paul holds out to the Philippians and to South Plains.

Paul's prayer of thanks is that "your love may overflow more and more... so that in the day of Christ (that is, the judgment day) you may be pure and blameless (1:10)." Our prayer of dedication is that the love we send with these handmade items will overflow more and more. Our hope is that we will all be found pure and blameless at the end.

Just as important, we believe with Paul that this sharing with people around the world give us all a share in the fellowship of the gospel. This is our sweat equity in the gospel. This fellowship is deepened and broadened from the good times knitting and sewing and stuffing in this country to include the joy of mothers in Malawi, Granada and wherever Presbyterians tell the good news.

God of grace whose mercy stretches around the world to people and places we can only imagine, hear us as we pray. Perfect our stumbling words with the beauty of your Holy Spirit, making our desires conform to your will.

We pray for fathers everywhere, giving thanks for the stability they offer to families and the sacrifices they make. Many of us gifted with fatherhood know we fall short of being adequate. Correct us when we falter. Redeem our efforts and fill our children with joy that you are our heavenly Father.

Look kindly on families without a father in the home today: on military families separated by duty; on homes divided by divorce; on relationships severed by crimes or other misconduct; and on all families where circumstances make the intimacy of fatherly love impossible. May your grace supply all that is lacking.

Lay your healing hand on the sick that battle disease, especially any who live with the uncertainty of cancer. Calm fears and anxieties as we each face the limitations of our humanity. And, give meaningful work to breadwinners, whatever that work may be.

Your church in this place prays for guidance and grace this summer as we strike out in new directions and plan for programs in the fall. Keep us faithful. Open our arms to welcome new friends in Jesus Christ. For in that name, we make our prayers as he taught us:

Glorious God, the talents and skills you give us are more than most of us can comprehend, and certainly more than any one of us could hope to practice. Yet, these abilities are knit together in gifts we can share with others around the world. We dedicate these caps, gowns, bears and blankets to the glory of your name. We ask that they might be wrapped around your love for those who use them. Bless the giver and the user of each item. Draw us all into your communion of love, in the name of the living Christ we pray. Amen.