

Introduction:

- A. I have a secret ambition—to be a commencement speaker. Not so much because I have anything that important to say but because I think it would be an interesting challenge. I checked to see if Trinity had anyone lined up yet—just in case. Turns out that the commencement speaker for the college is Erika Harold. She’s a strong Christian. She’s run for Congress a couple of times. She’s got a law degree... from Harvard. And she was the 2003 Miss America. So I thought I’d see if I could enter the middle school commencement speaker pool.
- B. Then I thought, I could pretend that you’re the graduating class! That’ you’re the ones being sent out from this place. We do that a lot here, of course. It’s really part of who we are. As our Core Values say, *“We love to put our fingerprints on those who pass through our congregation as our means of extending the influence of our church.”*
- C. Turn to **Phil. 2**. Last Sunday we looked at vv.19-24 how, even though Paul was in prison, he was going to send his best and most beloved guy, Timothy, to the church in Philippi to see how they were doing. In the qualities Paul admired in Timothy we saw the kinds of qualities we so often see in the students who come to be part of our church.

In the next paragraph Paul says that he is sending another man to Philippi with Timothy—Epaphroditus. He was from the church in Philippi. At the end of this letter Paul makes clear that the Philippian church had sent a substantial financial gift to help. **Vv.17-19:** *“Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.”* So Paul is now sending this letter with Timothy and Epaphroditus back to Philippi. Look at **2:25-30...**

- D. Village Church is a sending church. We don't usually have much of a choice about it but, when we say goodbye, we are very conscious that we aren't *losing* these friends. We are *sending* them. One day, sooner or later, we may send *you*. And that brings me back to my graduation speech. **We want to be and to send people from this church who, like Epaphroditus, are worthy of honor in the work of Christ.**

In **v.25** gives a vivid description of Epaphroditus. This is all we know of this man. There's nothing else about him in the Bible. But what a legacy! What a model. There's nothing said of his talents or gifts, age or background. They describe what Epaphroditus became to Paul and what we want to be with one another and those we might serve in the future.

I. WE WANT TO BE AND SEND STRONG ALLIES IN THE WORK OF CHRIST (2:25)

- A. "*Epaphroditus, my brother.*" Brother and sister—the most common designation for our fellow Christians in the Bible. It speaks of our unity in Christ our Elder Brother and our privileged place as sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. But here when Paul called Epaphroditus his brother it was a word that felt like a hearty hug with back slapping. Paul the Jewish blueblood and Epaphroditus the Greek convert. Two men who belonged together. It spoke of a kinship—of shared spiritual DNA, love of the same Father, passion for the same gospel, longings for the same home.

We want to send out people who learn here how to quickly embrace fellow believers—who learn and love their names, who talk soon of Jesus, who want to be together. One thing we've seen in each military family who has come to our church—they connect quickly. The Hartels, Cannarellas, Ingersolls, Lisa Perrone, Smeltzers. They find a church and they join the family. They know they won't be around for long so they don't waste time. Let's be and send people like that!

- B. Epaphroditus was also Paul's *co-worker*, and that's the kind of person we want to be and to send: *co-workers in*

spreading the good news and building up other believers. Paul had to do a hard job—serve Jesus while in prison. It must have been frustrating, lonely and puzzling. His burden for the churches was no less. His desire to spread the gospel had not abated. But it seemed he could do so little. I don't know what Epaphroditus and Timothy did for him but I suspect the main thing was simply share the burden of his heart—to pray with him and connect with people on his behalf. **A Christian co-worker shares our heart for God's work as much as they share the work itself.**

We want to be and send people who show up and say, “*What can I do to help? Where is the load heaviest around here? We can bring a meal. I'll help with the class. I'll pray for you. Would you like me to watch the kids?*” Illus.:

A few years ago at a congregational meeting I mentioned how hard it is for me to be disciplined in prayer. After the meeting **Bill Cargill** came up to me and said, “*I want to help you pray. I'll meet with you one hour every week, anytime, anywhere, to pray.*” I was taken aback. I had never been very good about maintaining a staff prayer time so we decided that Bill would come every Tuesday at 2 to pray with our staff. Now that he's gone, we still keep that discipline, and Bill has taken his prayerfulness to North Carolina where he and Janet serve missionaries.

- C. Paul also called Epaphroditus his *fellow soldier*. Let us be and send out those who are *fellow soldiers*. Here rises the specter of the well-disguised Enemy and a dark world that hates Christ, of wrestling with principalities and powers, of armor and vigilance and standing firm under fire. **It is hard to fight battles against the world, the flesh and the devil by ourselves.** It is hard to stand alone. Paul, locked in prison, had found a Christian comrade-in-arms in Epaphroditus. Here was a man who also knew the wiles of the Evil One but who also remembered the story from his home town how the Lord brought an earthquake to free Paul and Silas from prison and bring the jailer and his family to Christ. Here he was, *with* Paul, and back in Philippi that jailer and his family were part of his home

church! He knew that “*greater is who is in us than he who is in the world.*” You want a soldier like that by your side!

Jared Smith told me that when he entered the Navy chaplaincy he wanted to show the men and women he ministered to that he would stand by them even in the toughest training. Whether they go into chaplaincy or business; no matter how they exercise their gifts in a church, these are the kinds of fellow-soldiers we want to dispatch

- D. Those three words all describe what Epaphroditus was to Paul: brother, co-worker, fellow soldier. Then Paul paired two words to describe how the church in Philippi had seen him: “*who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs.*” Like that church, we send messengers to minister—to serve. The church didn’t just send Paul a financial gift. **They sent a gospel emissary, a kind of personal chaplain.** That’s what we do too when we send people out from here. I suspect that the church in Philippi took time before Epaphroditus left to lay hands on him and pray for his work as their agent of grace.

Epaphroditus brought word to Paul of God’s work in the church they both loved far away in Philippi. He told him how Lydia was doing, and the girl they had rescued from slavery, and the jailer’s kids, and how the gospel was spreading. He told how people were growing in their understanding and obedience of God’s Word and where they faced troubles. He told Paul what they’d learned about ministry and Paul filed that away to share with others.

All that bolstered Paul. The word here—*minister*—implies a kind of priestly service, someone who helps us worship and serve the Lord better.

When someone leaves VCL we want them to go bearing grace gifts for the next church. People who pray and encourage, who bring medicine for aching hearts and nourishment for those growing weak in the work; believers who are sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, a servant willing to wash feet for Jesus’ sake.

One special category of people we've sent are the missionaries who once worshipped with us: Alfors in Cameroon, Browns at Kansas University, Heidi Ramer in Perth, Australia, Pattersons in the Slovak Republic, Rutters in France, Harold & Meghann Lutz church planting in Cincinnati.

Epaphroditus's mission turned into a life-threatening ordeal. He became deathly ill. It didn't look like he'd recover. Paul worried. Now he had another sorrow heavy on his heart. Word traveled back to Philippi and they were distressed. Epaphroditus himself suffered all the more because he was so far from home. They all prayed, and ached, and worried, and then, "*God had mercy on him*" (v.27). What a relief! When he recovered Paul decided he had to send Epaphroditus home, along with Timothy. But he wanted to be sure they had the proper perspective on what had happened: **vv.29-30...**

II. WE WANT TO BE AND SEND BRAVE BELIEVERS (2:26-30)

- A. No one can predict what serving Jesus will bring us but we know from Christ himself that it will involve dying. It is how God shows his strength, his resurrection power in us. Dreams die. We are weakened by all manner of things. There are attacks and schemes of the devil. Paul himself was imprisoned. Epaphroditus was persecuted for his faith but he became deathly sick. Anyone could get sick, of course, but Paul says, "*he almost died for the work of Christ.*" Once anyone commits themselves to serve Christ all that they face becomes the work of Christ. To suffer is to share in Christ's suffering. To face death is part of taking up one's cross to follow Jesus.
- B. Life carries risks for all people, of course. But we believers in Christ need a special kind of bravery. We're *soldiers*, for goodness sake! We will need to be increasingly brave for Christ just to stand for our faith in this culture. But we also must be brave because face the sorrows and pressures of life by trusting and obeying Jesus. Here is where we are soldiers. We must stand, love God, and not sin.

C. Church is where we all prepare to risk our lives for Christ. Here we learn and practice the truths of the faith, in ordinary ways, day in and day out, so that when trouble crashes in upon us, we will not fail.

D. We send out a lot of people—a lot of *young* people—who want to serve Jesus. But it can be very hard. When I saw that **Tim McGarvey** was graduating this week with an M.A. in philosophy from Duquesne University, I commended him for maintaining his faith. He wrote back, *“Faith is an easy thing to lose in a discipline like Philosophy. I would be lying if I said that I have not had intense struggles over the past 6 years while studying it.”*

One of our student couples whom I most loved and respected served a church that just chewed them up and spit them out. It drove them both to dark depression, and then dismissed them. It was a disgrace! It took that dear couple years to recover, but they have not walked away from Jesus nor his church. A recovery church took them in and cared for them. His love for ministry returned as he taught a group of senior adults. *“I love those people,”* he told me once.

Chris Edwards wrote, *“We left VCL unsure of how we would be serving the Lord through the move and bought a business in Oklahoma. To our surprise the business was filled with many broken people with long histories of abuse, violence and abandonment. It was a far greater spiritual challenge than we expected, or frankly than we wanted. Having left seminary thinking we might encourage people to work out their marriages, we spent days with abused wives working out plans to safely evacuate them and their children from their homes while their husbands were at work.”*

E. Paul wrote to the Philippian church, *“Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him.”* That’s why we give standing ovations when our missionaries return to see us. Our heroes are not those whose churches are biggest or whose companies the most profitable or whose children get into the best schools. Our heroes are

those who have become to us dear brothers and sisters, co-workers and fellow soldiers; who were to us messengers and ministers of gospel grace; who determined to serve Jesus even if it killed them. These are the kinds of people we want to be and the kinds of Christians we want to send out. That's what we mean when we say we want to put our fingerprints on them.