

The One Who Completes the Work **Philippians 1:3–6**

The first Sunday after Easter is often called Holy Humor Sunday. On a day like this, I would normally try to begin with a funny story or a joke. But today, that is not easy. I know many of us have been caught off guard by sudden news, and I imagine that some of you are carrying heavy hearts this morning. I am too. When I first received the call, my own heart was unsettled for several days. My mind felt complicated. My work did not come easily. And over and over again, I found myself asking: *What do I say to the people I have loved for the past seven years?*

When United Methodist pastors are ordained as full elders, we make a promise. We promise that when we are sent to serve a church where our gifts are needed, we will obey. At its heart, that vow is a promise to recognize God’s call and to surrender ourselves to it. When Juhee and I heard that we would be appointed to a new place of ministry, our hearts were full of mixed emotions. We prayed together. We talked for a long time. And to be completely honest with you, my first response was much closer to “no” than “yes.” Our relationships here are strong. The evangelism movement we began earlier this year is beginning to grow. New people are visiting the church. There is life here. So the thought of moving so suddenly did not feel easy at all.

But when I looked more honestly into my own heart, I realized that the real reason was something deeper. The truth is, I simply wanted to stay here, in this place that has become so familiar and so dear. Since coming to the United States as an immigrant, I have moved many times. On average, we moved about every two years. But the place where we stayed the longest, the place where we finally stopped moving for a while, was right here, among you. For a long time, our home did not even have much furniture. But the first place where I bought a sofa and a dresser was the Asbury parsonage.

This is the place where, during the pandemic, when anti-Asian hate was rising and Juhee once said, “I feel afraid to go grocery shopping alone,” some of you said, “Anytime, we will go with you.” This is the place where, when we were sick with COVID 19 and could barely taste anything, people still brought us soup and meals with such love and care. This is the place where, when I walk Joy, I often meet our church family who greet me with bright smiles. This is the place where some of you stood beside me at protests. And when I shared the anxiety I carry as an immigrant, some of you said, “If the cameras come, stand behind me,” and you stood in front of me like a shield. This is the place where you received my Korean accent and my broken English with patience and love. This is the place where, whenever I returned from Korea or from traveling abroad, you welcomed me with smiles and the words, “Welcome home.”

And that is exactly what happened. This place became a new home for my wife and for me. And you became our family. That is why I did not want to leave. Other than that, I could not find any truly honest reason to say no to God’s call into a new place of ministry. Once I came to recognize that truth, I knew I could do nothing other than say yes to this new appointment.

Of course, it is also true that this new appointment feels like it is pushing us into an uncertain future—into uncharted territory, onto a road we have never walked before. None of us really knows what will come from something we did not plan and did not expect. And because of that, it is natural to feel anxious. I do too.

But sometimes uncertainty is exactly where God works. Sometimes uncertainty is not the absence of God’s will. Sometimes it is the very space where God’s will begins to unfold. The

passage we read today from Philippians is the opening of Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. Paul wrote many letters—to the Romans, the Corinthians, the Galatians, and others. But Philippians has a different tone from most of the rest.

What makes it different? Most of Paul's other letters were written to correct something—to address false teaching, moral failure, conflict, or confusion in the church. They often read like rebuke, instruction, or even a prescription. But Philippians is different. Philippians is full of affection. It is full of gratitude. It is much closer to a letter of comfort and encouragement. That is why Philippians is often called the letter of joy.

Paul loved the Philippian church deeply, and the Philippian church loved Paul deeply. But how did that church begin? Did it begin because Paul planned carefully, organized everything perfectly, and carried out a successful strategy? No. Quite the opposite.

In Acts 16, we read how the church in Philippi came into being. Paul originally planned to preach the gospel in Asia. But Scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit blocked that way. Things did not go according to Paul's plan. Then he tried to go to Bithynia, and again the Spirit prevented him. Not once, but twice, Paul's plans were interrupted.

Then one night Paul had a vision. In that vision, a man from Macedonia stood there and pleaded, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Philippi was never part of Paul's original plan. But Paul recognized that vision as God's call, and immediately he obeyed and went to Philippi.

And once he got there, was the journey smooth? Was everything easy? Not at all. As Paul was going to a place of prayer, he encountered a slave girl who made money for her owners by fortune-telling. She kept following them and shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation." What she said was true. But that interruption was certainly not part of Paul's plan for the day. Finally, Paul cast the spirit out of her.

And then what happened? Her owners realized that their source of profit was gone. They became furious. They seized Paul and Silas and dragged them before the authorities. They falsely accused them, saying, "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city." Paul came to preach the gospel. Instead, he was falsely accused, beaten, and thrown into prison, with his feet fastened in stocks. Was that part of Paul's mission strategy? Of course not. In every possible way, Paul's ministry in Philippi unfolded far away from his own plans and expectations.

But then what happened? At midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. And suddenly, there was a great earthquake. The prison doors flew open. Everyone's chains were unfastened. Was that Paul's plan? Did Paul think to himself, "This is perfect. I will sing loudly at midnight, everyone will hear me, the chains will fall off at just the right moment, and then people will believe"? No. None of that was Paul's plan. Paul did not plan to be imprisoned. Paul did not plan the miracle. Paul did not plan the doors opening or the chains falling off.

And yet through that very process, who came to believe in Jesus? The jailer. And the jailer's whole household. Paul's missionary journey was a long series of uncertain moments that had very little to do with his own plan. And in the middle of that uncertainty, Paul kept discerning the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and he kept doing the small things he could do. He received the dream. He crossed the sea. He looked for a place of prayer. Even in prison, he sang hymns. When the chains fell off, he did not run away. And through the Holy Spirit's guidance, and through Paul's small acts of obedience, the church in Philippi was born. That is why Paul can say in today's passage with such deep confidence:

“The one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” It was not Paul’s plan. It was not Paul’s achievement. Paul is saying, God began this good work, and God will complete it.

And today, I want to offer that same word to you: “The one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” I am confident of this. Because the truth is, the journey of faith we have shared together was never something we planned either. Did any of you expect, seven years ago, that a Korean pastor would be appointed to this church? Diane, did you plan for it? No!

Six months after I arrived, COVID 19 turned the whole world upside down. For almost a full year, we worshiped online instead of in person. We did not plan that. And yet now, on average, about twenty-five people join our online worship every week.

At the 30th anniversary service of our sibling church, Zion Korean UMC, our choir went there and sang in Korean. Many people in that service were deeply moved and blessed. I do not think any choir member ever said, “One day, I am going to sing a hymn in Korean.” And yet now, honestly, Asbury choir members’ Korean diction is better than my English pronunciation. And over the years, as our joint worship has continued, the relationship between our two churches has grown deeper and stronger.

When I look back, I can see this clearly: God has led us by a better path than the one we would have chosen for ourselves. So I hope we will not be too afraid of this unexpected season of change. And I hope we will not give ourselves over to disappointment. Instead, I pray that this will become a season in which we pray more deeply, listen more carefully, and expect more boldly the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Because this is still true. It was true then, and it is true now: “The one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” I am confident of this. Amen.