

Philippians 1:6

Week #7 in the Series "Whose Verse is it Anyway?"

Matt Skillen

Good morning, Church. How are you today? It is so good to be with you this morning. You know, it's funny. Tomorrow, Monday, August 22nd, I begin my 14th year as a professor at Elizabethtown College. Every year before the school starts, and I've been a teacher now for almost 20 years now - every year I get a nightmare while I'm sleeping about something going terribly wrong in my classroom. Maybe I've lost my entire class or I forgot to wear a shirt. Every year I have this recurring nightmare. The one that I had last night is that I was walking into class for the first day, I had forgotten my lecture notes. So thank you for letting my dreams come true this morning.

I'm reminded of a great story about a preacher. It's one of my favorite stories. Many years ago, I told this story when I was filling in for Pastor Tom when he was on vacation. It was one of the first opportunities that I had to preach here at St Paul's Church, probably eight years ago or more. And it's a story that I once heard from a preacher who preached a message at our church. He remembers telling the story about a guy who was a fill in preacher. He wasn't a full time minister anywhere, but any time a pastor needed a break or maybe they were on vacation, he would fill the pulpit for them. And he preached at a number of churches throughout the year, mostly during the summer months. He can remember once getting a call to cover for a church that he had never been to before. It was in a large city, and this is before GPS or smart phones, and he got lost trying to find this church. Well, the time for the service to start was rapidly approaching, and he panicked. So he went to a convenience store that he'd passed by a couple of times while trying to navigate to this church and asked for directions. And as he was trying to explain to the clerk where he was trying to get to another man in the store, said, Oh, I know that church. That's my church. If you get in your car, I'll get in mine. You can follow me there. This pastor was beyond thankful, so he got into his car quickly. He followed the kind man all the way to the church. He was just a couple of blocks away. He remembered thinking how funny it was that he might have driven past it and missed it. But as he got to the church parking lot he quickly ran to the man who had helped him, rolled down his window and they exchanged pleasantries. The pastor is thanking him and as he begins to leave to go into the church, he says to the man, I'll see you inside. To which the man in the car said, I'm not coming in today. We have a guest preacher. Funny, right? That's kind of how I feel this morning because I am a little out of my element. Many of you who have seen me preach before and know that I preach from notes. Whenever I'm asked to preach at St Paul's, whether I'm have given a week or a day to prepare, I usually sit down in a quiet place. Usually it's very quiet, no background noise. I am on my laptop, I write about 2700 to 3000 words and I refine several times before I'm ever able to speak in front of you. So today, this is going to be something of a different experience for me, and I'm excited to do that. But at the same time, I mean, I

am wildly out of my element and in sometimes I know that the best things that can happen to us are when we are pushed and stretched to the point at which we may be beyond our ability. Because today, there's great work that's happening both within us as a community and in us as individuals who call ourselves Christians. So thank you for joining me today in this little adventure into God's word that we're going to take together. I hope above all else, and I believe it to be true - any investigation into God's word, be it one passage, one chapter, one book - God's truth is revealed to us. And I think He's got a remarkable truth to share with us today.

One thing that I love about this message series "Whose Verse is it Anyway?" is that it focuses squarely on the Word of God, the very scriptures that we hold close to our hearts, that we look to for guidance, that speak inspiration to us. And so what I think is really neat about this is that every single week, in every opportunity we have a new invitation to look into a very small slice of the word of God, but also apply it to the much larger story that God is telling through us. The Bible is a remarkable set of passages and resources for us.

Billy Graham once said, The Bible is God's book of promises. But unlike the books of men, it does not change or go out of date. Think of the generations of people who have come to St Paul's Church, the generations of people who, before that, gathered in makeshift buildings that were built in the new world or in parts of Europe, or are now meeting in underground churches in places like the Middle East and in Asia. The Word of God penetrates those places and speaks truth, over time in generations. Mohammed Gandhi, not even a Christian, once said that the Bible contains enough dynamite to turn the world upside down and bring peace to our war torn world. But we often treat it as if we're nothing more than literature. It is truly a remarkable book that not only stands the test of time but has remarkable power. John Locke once said of the Bible, The Bible is one of the greatest blessings bestowed by God on the children of men. It has God for it's author, salvation for it's end and truth without any mixture. For it's matter, it is all pure. Truly the word of God is lasting. Truly the word of God is powerful. And truly the word of God is revealing. It brings light to the darkness. It is the fresh wind in the hot and stale and often stagnant places in our lives. It is our anchor and foundation that we can hold on to, that we can build upon. Just as the storms begin to rush in, the Word of God brings order to chaos in our lives. This we know. So let's explore what he has for us today.

When I saw that the passage that was selected today came from the book of Philippians, I was really excited because I love the letters of Paul. Paul is, as you know, of course, a figure that speaks such truth to the early churches that were forefathers, if you will, of the Christian church. And they were dealing with a remarkable set of challenges as they set out to celebrate their faith and to learn and grow with one another. As I look at our passage today, Philippians 1:6, it says Be confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion, until the day of Christ Jesus. At first glance, that is a remarkable rallying cry. It's a shot in the arm of affirmation. It's the pep talk of all

pep talks. It's that note of confidence. A note of faith. And I often wondered what Paul must have heard or what he would have understood when he reached out to write to the Church of Philippi at this time. But as I think about this passage, I'm reminded of one particular truth that maybe resonates with all of us here this morning. Have you ever thought? I'm not enough. As I look out into the great and crazy world that's out there, have you ever wondered? I don't have enough. I could never make a difference. You see, when we look at the tremendous challenges in our culture, when we look at what's happening sometimes in our communities, if we stop for a moment and maybe begin to feel overwhelmed about what's even happening in our own church, it's very easy sometimes when we get frustrated, when we get angry, when we get overwhelmed to think, I don't have that much to give in order to solve that problem. I'm simply not equipped. Here's the truth. Just as Paul reveals to the Philippians in his prayer to them at the opening of his letter. God is still working in you. He is still working through you. And he says, you are everything that I need. We might come to him in our overwhelmed state and throw our arms up and say, I am not enough. His reply is, you are all that I need. Paul writes this letter, as I mentioned to the people of Philippi, this great city in the Roman Empire. Now, this is a brand new church full of people who, up until this very point in time didn't know who Jesus was. They didn't know what salvation was. They didn't they didn't really know much of anything else. These were Roman citizens before they were Christians who would have been pagans. They would have been polytheistic. Through Paul's discipleship, they came to know Jesus Christ. They came to know what salvation from sin was. They came to know what hope and an everlasting life in heaven was. And as a new church, as you can imagine, they would have had some significant challenges. Much like Paul - the individual who's in prison being persecuted for his beliefs. This is something that was happening in that culture all the time. Just imagine if Paul was writing a letter to St Paul's Church at this time. The church at that time was being persecuted by non-Christians. They were probably maligned and made fun of, probably scoffed at in public spaces. Sound familiar? I know that sometimes it's hard to affirm my belief in Jesus Christ in certain places in culture. Another thing that was happening at that time is that other religious scholars from other religions, like the Judaism and others, were criticizing these new communities of faith, telling them, No - you got this all wrong. Let us tell you how it really is supposed to go. They also had internal challenges. The people disagreed with one another; there were questions about leadership and who should be able to lead within a church. This caused all kinds of turmoil and chaos and tension. Even from his confinement, Paul writes the letter. And what he tries to do in this letter, in this first chapter, is to name these internal and external forces. And to describe how they're taking a toll. He wants to write a letter of encouragement. And can't we all use a little encouragement every once in a while?

I learned this trick from a teacher many years ago when I was a middle school language arts teacher in Mays, Kansas, and I visited his classroom, and we were talking about the trade and he was giving me a few tips and tricks on how to manage middle school people and how to schedule my classes so that we can make the use of all 47 minutes that I had with each group throughout the day. And as we were concluding our time, he

pulled up this really big file from his file cabinet. I can remember the sound that it made as it slapped his desk as he sat it down. And he said, you need one of these files. I said, What's the file? And he said, this is my Teacher Feel Good file. This job is bloody difficult at times, so I keep little notes of inspiration that I've collected over the years. On bad days, I open it up and read these notes of encouragement at random. Well, taking his advice, I did start at Teacher Feel Good file. And over the years, I've kept it in a variety of places. It's currently sits in my office at Elizabethtown College, and it has notes and little pieces of inspiration that I've collected over my time as a teacher. And I took a look at that file the other day as I was moving some things around in my office and I found that in that file were some notes from my first superintendent, Craig Elliott. Craig Elliott was a remarkably inspirational person. He would keep little note cards in the breast pocket of his suit, and if he walked by your classroom or happened to see you do something that was supportive of other people, he would jot down a little handwritten notes and he would throw it in your mailbox at your school. In my time working for Craig Elliott, I received two notes from him. I also have some of the first observational notes that principals made when they visited my classroom. I kept those because, while there were certainly some critiques, there was also some really great observations of things that were beginning to emerge in my teaching practice that I wanted to hold on to. I found a note written on a piece of scrap paper, some orange construction paper. It was scribbled in pencil and big letters that just simply said, Mr. Skillen, your fly has been down the entire class. I also found one, it was almost like five or six pages of notebook paper, written by a student, just a number of things that were going on in that students life at that time. But the part that I highlighted and return to is Mr. Skillen, thank you for listening. You're doing a great job. Things like that really are remarkable. And on the times that are tough, a note of inspiration is important.

Have you ever had somebody encourage you to walk alongside you and say, you're doing a great job? The challenge that I have for you today is could you be that voice of encouragement to someone else? I'm reminded, as I now have children that are cresting into their early teens. Some of those early years when we were parents. There were a couple of times where people in public or maybe even a couple of people here at St Paul's Church walked alongside us as we were just dreadfully tired; babies screaming, the entire church service and they were coming up beside us and saying, You're doing a great job. Keep up the good work.

In our passage today this this one verse comes from a section in the Philippians letter called The Prayer for the Philippians. What's remarkable about it is Paul is speaking from a posture of faith. He's speaking to them with great confidence, that confidence coming from knowing who Jesus Christ is and the great power that comes through him. In Chapter 1, Verse 3-11, where this passage is found, the prayer says this. I thank, my God, every time I remember you constantly praying with you in every one of my prayers for all of you because of your sharing in the Gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this that the one who began a good work among you will begin will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way all about you.

Because you hold me in your heart for all of you share God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the Gospel for God is my witness. How I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer. That your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best. So that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless. Having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Amid a really remarkable period within the Roman culture as the church of the Philippians was beginning to emerge, Paul casts a vision because he knows that the great work that God has been doing in every single one of us and the great work that He continues to do through us even today will come to completion when Jesus returns. If you ever feel as though you're overwhelmed, as if to say, I don't have enough - the Word of God tells us that we are all he needs.

I feel compelled to just dwell here for just one moment. Because I know that at times very recently and going forward, as a church, as individuals, we face remarkably difficult questions that we can't even begin to answer. But God says the great work that He has started in this will continue until His return. We are all in process, my friends. From the day that we say yes to Jesus Christ, he begins a new work in us, to fashion us, to mold us, to shape us into the people he has called us to be. And in every obstacle and every challenge and every thing that this life throws at us, he is refining us And continuing to shape us. For what he has called us to in this life. That is the great God we serve. That is the great inspiration that comes from this powerful, lasting and everlasting book.

I hope that above all else, if you are looking for encouragement today, that you will run to the Word of God to find it in the letters of Paul, or maybe even in the Gospels, or maybe even in the Psalms and Proverbs, wherever you find that inspiration. I hope that you seek it today. And let me invite you to be that voice of encouragement to someone else. Because that feels really good when it's needed.

Let us pray. Gracious God, we thank you for your word. We thank you for the word that you have given us for the part we play in this great world that you've created. May you embolden us, Lord. May you invite us closer to use that we can be. Like you. This we pray, your gracious name. Amen.