

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

You've got to love St. Paul. Thirteen of our New Testament epistles were written by him. Most of them were written to churches to whom he ministered, although there are also those we know as the *Pastoral Epistles*, which were written to individuals, specifically as encouragement from an older pastor to a young pastor. The letters that Paul wrote to the churches are packed with so much teaching of the grace and mercy of God. If I ask how we are saved, you may quote the words the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."* (Ephesians 2:8-9, ESV) The Holy Spirit used the words He had given to St. Paul to help Luther rediscover the Gospel that had been forgotten by the church, as Luther read in Paul's letter to the Romans: *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'"* (Romans 1:16-17, ESV) Do you want to know more about the blessings and power of the resurrection? Read 1 Corinthians 15. What about the true understanding of the Lord's Supper. That's also in 1 Corinthians, in chapters 10-11. Are you struggling to understand the nature of sin and the grace of God? Look at the letter to the Romans, especially the verses that include our Epistle lesson today. Are you trying to understand the second coming of the Lord? Paul deals with that, especially in his letters to the Thessalonians. If you want to know about spiritual gifts and how to best use them to the glory of God, well, you're back in Romans and 1 Corinthians, as well as other parts of his letters.

I have always appreciated the epistles that God, the Holy Spirit, inspired Paul to write for the sake of the church. But there is something else I have always appreciated in the letters of Paul. In them we see a true pastor's heart. There are times when Paul has to proclaim God's law, which he always does with boldness. When the Galatians were confusing law and gospel through the influence of the group known as the Judaizers, Paul wrote: *"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed."* (Galatians 1:6-9, ESV) Or when there were abuses of the Lord's Supper, Paul told the Corinthians: *"But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized."* (1 Corinthians 11:17-19, ESV) Some of his simplest teaching comes as he says: *"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves."* (Philippians 2:3, ESV) God's law must be proclaimed, but so must the wonderful good news of the Gospel. Here again, we learn from Paul: *"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,"* (Romans 3:23-24, ESV)

But there is another aspect of Paul's pastoral heart which I have always appreciated. It is in the love that Paul has for the people of God. Paul says to the Romans: *"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you"* (Romans 1:8-11, ESV) In the same way he tells the Corinthians: *"I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge"* (1 Corinthians 1:4-5, ESV) He writes to the Colossians and says: *"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints,"* (Colossians 1:3-4, ESV) He says to the Thessalonians: *"We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."* (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3, ESV) I'm starting to think that this sermon is like a television clip show—lots of short verses strung together. But I think you get the idea.

I like this aspect of Paul's ministry. I always thought it was important for me to share that same love with you, the people so loved by God. While this may not be the last time I have the privilege of sharing God's Word of hope, promise and life with you from this pulpit, the next time it will not be as your pastor. I will do it as a guest, or as a substitute. Should that occasion arise, it will be a joy to share that Word with you. But while I have this opportunity I want to say what I know I have said in a sermon before: ***I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.***

Think of that word, "partners" for a moment. The word here is *koinonia*, which means fellowship, participation and partnership. We heard a great deal about this word through our bible study at the synodical convention. We speak of partners in a variety of ways—as business partners and marriage partners. We speak of "partners in crime". Sadly, all of us have been partners in the sin of Adam. Who else, but St. Paul tells us: ***"Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned."*** (Romans 5:12, ESV) What can we claim before God? We are low-down, good for nothing, lower than a snake's belly in a gutter sinners. How often have our sinful ways created separation, indifference and strife among us? This isn't a great partnership, but it is one that is ours as part of fallen, sinful humanity.

Fortunately we can look at a positive partnership. ***"For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive."*** (1 Corinthians 15:22, ESV) In our Gospel lesson today Jesus offers a truly wonderful invitation: ***"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."*** (Matthew 11:28–29, ESV) We come to the Saviour who yokes Himself to us. He has taken our sin upon Himself and suffered and died in our stead as the perfect sacrifice for sin. We are made alive in the Living Lord, who has conquered death, hell and the grave for us. Yoked to Christ, united with Him in our Baptism, we also are joined to one another. Through the Spirit, Paul got that right, too: ***"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."*** (Galatians 3:28, ESV)

Blessed with this *koinonia*, this partnership and fellowship with Christ, we gather as one family at His table, as He gives to us in the bread and wine His very body and blood—a testament to our partnership with Him. Empowered by His grace, forgiveness and love, we also become partners in the ministry that is carried out in His Church, as we use our gifts to serve Him and one another.

With Paul I say in all love and sincerity: ***I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*** We have been partners, but this partnership has never been about us. From first to last, it is all about God and His grace and mercy for us in Jesus Christ. The crucified, resurrected and ascended Christ has forgiven us, blessed us and empowered us for service to His glory. He has seen us through the ups and downs of life and through the ups and downs in His Church. If it were not for His partnership with us, there would be no church. But He will continue to be with us and bless His church until the day He—and He alone—brings it all to completion.

In St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg, Germany there is an altar work by Lucas Cranach the Elder, a close friend of Martin Luther, who was known as "the painter of the Reformation." The altar work was installed in Wittenberg in 1547 and contains a triptych—a three panel painting resting on a fourth panel. The triptych depicts in order, from left, Baptism, the Lord's Supper and the Office of the Keys. Underneath these three panels Cranach painted one of my favourite artworks, which is on our screen today. It reveals Christ crucified, the foundation upon which the Reformation was established and the Church is built. This panel depicts the congregation on the left, listening to Luther preach from the right side of the panel. Luther's one hand rests on the Scripture and the other points to Christ. Jesus is in the middle of the panel—the focus of the Word and the foundation of the Church.

This picture always reminds me of the *koinonia*, the fellowship and partnership we have shared. I thank God for you and for that partnership. Today, you will begin a new partnership in the Gospel with the shepherd God has provided for you. Things will be different, and for that I am sure you will want to thank and praise God. But at the centre of it all, as senior partner, if you will, is Jesus. He began the partnership. He blessed it all. He will continue to bring it to completion. And that is something we can look forward to together. The day is coming when all God has planned for His church in this world will come to an end. When it does, we will be united in singing the praises of Him who died for us, who rose for us, who lives and reigns for all eternity. We will share in His blessings. And we will know that it was never about us, for from first to last it is all about the God who loved us and redeemed us as His own possession in Christ. Soli Deo Gloria! To God alone be the glory forever and

ever. Amen.