

Occasion: Second Sunday in Advent ©)

Text: Philippians 1:2-11

Title: "A Work in Progress"

Date: 12-06-2009

Introduction:

In 1503, Michelangelo, the famous Italian artist, was commissioned to carve the twelve Apostles for the Florence Cathedral. He began carving St. Matthew in 1504 but never finished the sculpture, nor undertook to sculpt the other apostles.

Michelangelo's method of carving his sculptures has been described in the following words:

He first imagined the form that waited within the stone. Michelangelo said that, "every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it." He would next pick up his mallet and chisel to begin chipping away, somewhere in the middle of the piece of marble, carefully working his way upward, downward, and around the block of stone as he removed the excess marble in order to slowly reveal the form that awaited release.

Michelangelo's biographer, Vasari, described Michelangelo's sculptural skill by saying that his sculptures emerged from the stone, "...as though surfacing from a pool of water." -

Page 3 <http://pal.loswego.k12.or.us/Michelangelo-Volunteer%20Presentation-Notes.pdf>

Michelangelo's "St. Matthew" remains to this day an unfinished work, forever awaiting to emerge completely from the block of stone.

Setting:

As the apostle Paul begins his letter to the Christians in Philippi, he does so mentioning his prayers on their behalf:

³I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵because of your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now, ⁶being confident of this, that He Who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

The apostle Paul visited Philippi on his Second Missionary Journey. Located in Macedonia, the first convert to Christianity in Europe mentioned in the Bible took place in Philippi. Scripture tells us of Paul's experience in Philippi:

¹⁴A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.



¹⁵And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us. - Acts 16:14-15

Now, as the apostle Paul is imprisoned in Rome awaiting his trial before Caesar, he writes to thank the Philippian Christians for their most recent gift and support:

¹⁵You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; ¹⁶for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs. ¹⁷Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account. ¹⁸But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God. - Philippians 4:15-18

Yes, the Philippian Christians were generous supporters of the apostle Paul in his mission work, partners with him in proclaiming the Gospel. As Paul had seen God's hand at work in the lives of the Philippian Christians, so as he begins his letter to them, Paul writes that he is confident God will continue to work in their lives and carry it on to completion. They will not be like the "Unfinished Sculpture" of Michelangelo, remaining forever incomplete and undone.

Paul goes on to write about his desire for God's continued work among the Philippian Christians to bring to completion what God has begun in them:

⁹And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, ¹¹filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God. - Philippians 1:9-11

Today, as we prepare in this Advent season to celebrate the birth of the Savior, we are an "Unfinished Work" awaiting our completion by the hand of God in our lives. What the apostle Paul requests in prayer on behalf of the Philippian Christians is also a need in our lives, as we await the Day of Christ and His return. What is the "Unfinished Work" of God in our lives? How are we best prepared to celebrate our Lord's birth? How are we best prepared for our Lord's coming again?

I. GOD'S WORK IN US: A LOVE THAT ABOUNDS:

We use the word "Love" so often, but do we know what it really means? Do we know the "Love" that God wants us to have for Him? - For others?

The apostle Paul first prayed to the Philippians that "**your love may abound more and more...**" The idea he expresses in the word "abound" is "to overflow, to be in excess, to be more than necessary or called for." God wants us to give love far more than what is needed in any given situation. Such love is the way that God loves us, much more than we deserve or is called for.

The Scripture tells us that Love:

Is greatest virtue:

¹³And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.
– 1 Corinthians 13

Comes from God:

⁷Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love... ¹⁰This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. – 1 John 4

Is a work of the Holy Spirit:

⁵God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.
– Romans 5

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love,... – Galatians 5

Is not based on the behavior others, but is given freely as a gift to all people, despite their behavior or circumstances:

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? – Matthew 5

Is lived out by imitating God’s love for us:

[Jesus said:] ³⁴A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” – John 13

¹Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children ²and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.
– Ephesians 5

II. GOD’S WORK IN US: A LOVE BUILT ON THE FOUNDATION OF THE TRUTH:

But not only does the apostle Paul pray that the love of the Philippians “abounds” or “overflows to excess”, but also that their love do so **“in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless...”** Any understanding or definition of love that comes from us, or from any person, will be corrupt or twisted, because such a definition will be ruined by our selfish

and corrupt heart mired in sin. No! The apostle Paul prays that the love that is to “abound” in the Philippians is **“in knowledge and depth of insight”**, that is, based on God’s Word and the Truth of what God has revealed in Scripture. Only God’s love is pure and undefiled by selfishness and sin. Only God’s revelation of pure and undefiled love that is given in the Scriptures is reliable and trustworthy. Thus, Scripture also says of love:

Must be real, authentic, active:

⁹Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. – Romans 12

²²Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. – 1 Peter 1

Is the fulfillment of the Law:

⁸Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.
– Romans 13

[Jesus said:] ⁹“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. ¹¹I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹²My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. – John 15

Conclusion:

As we look at our lives, we must see ourselves as God sees us, “A Work in Progress”. When God sent His Son into the world at Christmas, God was sending Jesus so that He would redeem us, that is, pay for us with His blood, that we might be freed from sin and punishment, and might belong again to God and be His Own. God has sent His Holy Spirit into our lives to raise us from the death of sin and to open our eyes to know the truth, that the One True God has created us to live forever in a relationship with Him, living in His image and likeness. God is now at work in your life, to transform you to become the pure and loving person He created you to be.

That is the Truth: You are alive today because God made you. You know Jesus as your Savior, because God has enlightened your mind to know His Son and the sacrifice Christ has made for you. God’s plan for your life is that you live forever with Him as your Father. God’s plan for your life is that you forever give a sacrificial and unconditional love to others. So what are you doing today? What are you doing tomorrow? Are you allowing God to continue to “chip away” all your selfish ways? Are you becoming the new person God has recreated you in Christ to be? You may now be a “Work in Progress”, but you do not have to be an “Unfinished Sculpture”! AMEN