



“TRANSFORMATION”
SCRIPTURE: PHILIPPIANS 3:17-4:1
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
Sunday, March 13, 2022
The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

Philippians 3:17-4:1

3:17 Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.

3:18 For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears.

3:19 Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.

3:20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

3:21 He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

4:1 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Dear Grace Covenant Community,

Grace and peace to you in the name of the one who knows us and loves us with unique power to heal our bodies, our relationships, and our souls.

This letter comes from my heart—the center of who I am and where the flame of Christ burns within me—always has and always will.

Everytime you come to my mind, I can feel it right here, in my heart, in the center of my being, in the place deep inside me that knows love when I feel it. Everytime I think of you, so many feelings come up, but first and foremost, I

can feel it right here—where I know I am alive, where I know God is calling me to be fully alive.

This letter is inspired by the letter Paul wrote to the faithful in Philippi. As I read his words, I began to imagine him in his jail cell picturing the faces and feeling the stories of the people he knew in Philippi. There were probably not near as many of them as there are of you. It was probably a house church or a few house churches. And Paul really cared about them—they were on his mind as he was a prisoner of the Roman Empire. I imagined what comfort and what sorrow he felt all at the same time.

And I started to think about what I would say to you all if I wrote you a letter—not just a Grace Note about Lent or GCPC Palooza, but a letter from a place where I wasn't sure I would ever see you again.

And that's when my heart got activated. And I felt led, persuaded, encouraged to let my heart say what it wants and needs to say.

Paul wanted his Philippian siblings to remember their capacity to be true to a new way of life. There were some things challenging them—some people, some situations, no doubt some temptations, no doubt some people acting out like people in churches sometimes do. Paul had a lot of confidence in the leaders of the Philippian faithful.

I want you to know, Grace Covenant, that I see you. I see your courage, I see your stamina, I see your capacity to struggle and ask questions and wonder. I see your capacity for generosity and genuine love and concern for each other. I have felt that from you on many occasions. Beautiful moments of community flourishing and growing together. I hope you know that I feel so blessed to be your pastor. And I marvel at all the ways you say yes to the strenuous work of being faithful in these difficult times on planet earth.

I tell people all the time that this is a low anxiety church. You don't get upset about things that other churches get upset about—like moving the font around or singing a song you have never heard before. Generally, you do a beautiful

job of communicating and asking questions when something is bothering you. That spirit of trust and curiosity supports the deep dive we take into difficult questions. **It's one of the prerequisites of being transformed—being open to things shifting and changing, being willing to seek answers to questions when the answer you hear may not be what you were expecting.**

So, I'm not in jail today—obviously. And I am right here with you, so a letter may seem like a strange choice for the sermon. But that's another thing I love about you, you savor creativity and the Spirit's penchant for surprises. I don't know exactly why Spirit prompted me to write this letter, but it's what I feel called to do—kinda like coming here in the first place, I didn't know why God was bringing me back into parish ministry, but the call was so clear, so strong—strong enough to make the things I didn't know fade in importance because of what I did know.

And even when I got here, I really didn't have any idea what was in store. But Spirit kept prompting me to believe that you really did want me to be myself, and that is what I have been—myself. And that is all I have ever wanted from all of you—for you to be yourself. I see what beautiful things can happen when we are free to be ourselves, when we can be honest about our dreams and what hurts and what feels supportive and what does not.

I want you to know that the love I have for you is strong—strong enough to make me work in a church, which frankly isn't the easiest or most enjoyable job in the world sometimes. Working in a church gets hard when trust gets broken, when people forget the promises we make to one another when a pastor comes to a church. Working in a church gets hard when people project things onto you that you know is not about you, but no matter how much you know that, the people doing the projecting will rarely ever realize that. Sometimes it hurts, even with how much I have worked to reframe my relationship to those things.

Sometimes I feel so much sorrow about you, Grace Covenant, not because you aren't measuring up to some standard, but because you can forget what a beautiful opportunity we have to heal some deep wounds together. There are

not many churches doing the work we are doing together, building what we are building together. Sometimes I wonder if you really know the magnitude of what Spirit is doing here.

The world is not an easy place to live in—we get reminders of that all the time. Our relationship has been forged in some of the most heartbreaking days this country has ever seen—from the extra-judicial murders of black and brown bodies by police to an insurrection in our nation’s capital, to children in cages on the border, to accelerating climate change and extinctions on this planet, to bold faced violence from superpowers who are willing to kill and destroy to get their way, to the tenacious challenges in our own community around true equity and justice and reparation—you and I have built our lives together in some volatile and excruciating conditions.

Sometimes I wonder if you are able to see the whole picture—the big, vivid, technicolor picture of our transformation—the way the day in and day out practices and conversations and hard moments and beautiful emerging relationships are unfolding into a new world for us –I wonder if you are able to see the way we are being transformed as a collective.

I so want you to be able to see that. It is beautiful and humbling and inspiring—and something that far outstretches anything you or I could have planned on.

I so want you to trust how the Spirit is drawing us in—closer to each other and closer to truth that can set us all free.

Transformation is all about new life—but it’s also about not being afraid of death, of what we are called to let go of as new ways of being together unfold.

As we walk into the uncharted territory of what church is in this day and age—in a world where COVID has made our sanctuary bigger than any construction project could have ever made it, we are walking on a path that will only be made in us walking it together.

Some people who were here before COVID, are gone. Some have died. Some have moved. Some have left. Some we may never know what happened. Others are here who were not here before COVID. I am in awe of the way the Spirit is gathering in people in ways we could have never expected—the things that some people thought might be the end of church, have created the conditions for a new beginning.

This letter is really a birthday present to myself—today I turn 53. It is my first birthday without my mother alive—the one who gave birth to me. The one who told me about my origin story and my childhood, the one who celebrated the day I was born in a way no one else could—my birth is something we did together. And now that her death is something we have done together, I realize that life feels very different to me now.

I want us to really treasure each other and what we have together. I want us to find ways to embrace the moments where we really are present. I want us to really honor the gift that we have been given. I want us to marvel together, to wonder together, to keep being willing to struggle together with abiding love and deep respect.

I don't know what the future holds—I could have never predicted where we are today. So, please let go of any illusion you have that I have an agenda or I have some set map for where we go from here. All I have is the faith that got me here and that keeps me here and that fills my heart with the love I have for all of you. And I trust that is enough. And I ask you to stay present—with your full self. Spirit brought you here for a reason. Your presence is part of the way this community can thrive—remember that!

We long for a day when life won't hurt so much for so many. Learning how to belong to each other is the best medicine we can offer to this ailing world. Therefore, my siblings, whom I love, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Peace and love,
Marcia