

Thanks be to You, our heavenly Father, because You have called us into the Church of Your Son, Jesus Christ, and have begotten us again unto a lively hope through the Gospel. Keep us steadfast in the faith, that we may remain living stones in this Your spiritual temple to our last day, and cause us always to rejoice over Your salvation. Amen. (Reading the Psalms with Luther, CPH, Ps. 87, p. 207)

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 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. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

In Christ Jesus, who has made us all saints in His name, dear fellow redeemed:

As Paul addressed the Christians in Philippi, so I can address you today – *“To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Parkland, with the overseers, that is, the pastors: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”* Imagine, those of you who were formerly Roman Catholic, hearing yourself being called a saint! At one time that designation would have seemed truly inappropriate, downright blasphemous. But now you know differently. While you know you do not deserve to be called a saint in your own right, for Jesus’ sake you know and trust that it is most appropriate.

Even you who have been born, reborn and raised at Parkland have come to know that this same good work of being made a saint of God in Christ has been begun in you. All of you from various spiritual backgrounds have understood this to be the case. You also trust that remaining a saint to the very end is also a sure thing because the faithful One who began it promises to bring it to completion. So let us glory in this truth: **On the Day of Jesus Christ, God’s Work Begun in You Will Be Completed.**

### I

Paul had been a Pharisee following the Jewish religion with great zeal. Later in this same letter he warned about false teachers like himself in his previous life. But he “boasted” about himself saying: “If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ... as to righteousness

under the law, blameless.” But going on, he confessed now after having the good work begun in him believing in Jesus as Savior: *I am found in Christ, “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness FROM God that depends on faith.”*

Our faith in Christ trusts that in His suffering and death, Jesus was condemned for our sin and paid the full price for our sins, thus securing for us the forgiveness of all our sins. Our faith also includes the trust that when Jesus rose from the dead, He, our hold Substitute, was justified before the Father, declared to be right and holy. No longer do our sins cling to Him and we too are justified before God in Jesus’ name. Jesus’ everlasting righteousness is yours my fellow saints. Paul could rejoice that his brothers and sisters at Philippi were blameless, not according to the law, just he was not, but blameless for Jesus’ sake alone. Such is the same good work begun in you as well. Whether it was through the gracious waters of life at your baptism or when you heard the Gospel proclaimed to you, the Holy Spirit began that good work in you, when you first trusted in Jesus to be your Savior.

When we have offered individual absolution, have you ever taken note of this verse being quoted to you at the end: *“May He who has begun the good work in you perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.”* This is not an empty wish spoken to you by the pastor, it is based on the very promise of God. Your faith trusts that word of forgiveness as the very words of Christ Jesus Himself. Through it you receive life and salvation. That is what made the Samaritan leper whole in our Gospel lesson and why he returned to give thanks.

I recall when I first came to serve you at Parkland 34 years ago, I heard from several members that I was not like Pastor Handberg, who had served as pastor before me, but that this was acceptable since I was saying the same things. That was comforting since it told me that you were well instructed seeking the voice of the Good Shepherd and when heard from His called pastors despite their various personalities and styles it was an appreciated blessing and comfort to you. Jesus promised “He who hears you, hears Me.” Therefore, as your pastors now continue to declare this same saving truth from Jesus you will not be troubled. You will receive what Jesus desires that you receive, so that the good work begun in you will be brought to completion in that day of Jesus’ return.

But understand this promise of completion in the day of Christ’s return cannot happen if you resist the working of the Holy Spirit. You must receive of His grace to keep that work of faith begun in you. His gracious working upon you happens where Jesus has promised to come to you. Here through

Word and Sacrament. The promise is certain but not apart from His gracious working in you.

## II

We assume this letter from Paul was written as a prisoner in Rome. He had been receiving good reports that this congregation continued in the grace of Christ, serving the same Lord. So, he wrote: “I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus... it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.”

Paul had heard things were different in the Christian congregation he had started in the city of Corinth. There was division with some saying *“I follow Paul, or I follow Apollos, or I follow Cephas (Peter) or I follow Christ.”* Paul responded: “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth... For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building.”

The planter here at Parkland was Pastor Bjug Harstad, Pastor Handberg and I were among the long list of those who have been watering ever since, like Pastors Gullixson and Sparley are doing for you today. But no matter who the pastors have been, it is God who has given the growth for the congregation at large and for you personally. I have been called by our Lord to serve in another place in His kingdom now, but because of its nature, I am intending to be a recipient of ongoing reports of your faithfulness. Yes, you and I will continue to struggle with our sin daily. But the good work begun in you will continue as you hear the same message: “Your sins are all forgiven you” in Jesus’ name, so that you may...be pure and blameless for the day of Christ. In Jesus you are free from the guilt of all your sin and dressed in Jesus’ holiness for all eternity – what a work begun and will be completed in you!

The difference from Paul in this regard is that I will not be thinking and praying for you as a prisoner, at least not yet. But I am looking at the next four years that our partnership in the Gospel will continue although separated by over a thousand miles and in different roles.

Your love for one another and for your many neighbors God places in your lives is expected to abound more and more. It is expected because again you have become by God’s grace, His holy ones, His saints. You naturally are “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” As I visited about half of our ELS congregations last year, I repeatedly witnessed Christians gathered in Christ-centered worship, receiving of His abundant grace and mercy. This is

what produces the fruit of righteousness in God's people. What I have had the privilege of proclaiming to you in Word and Sacrament, that all your sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake and that you are declared righteous in His name will continue to be done among you according to His will.

It has been a pleasure working among you and serving you as your pastor for these many years. But looking back, the fruit of righteousness was never to our glory, but to the glory and praise of our Lord who has blessed our various efforts. One particular memory of how it has been to God's glory alone is when we dedicated the Rick Daniels Memorial Building. Our three leaders whom God used to accomplish it were on stage being recognized: Paul Mielbrecht, chairman of the congregation, was wearing a neck brace from a recent surgery; Dennis Nixon, the project manager, had to close one eye to avoid seeing double because of a recent stroke; and Rick Nylander the contractor who arranged the subcontractors was walking with a cane from a recent back surgery. That scene dripped with the words from Ps. 115 "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but to Your name give glory, for the sake of Your steadfast love and Your faithfulness."

Thank you for your kind Christian patience overlooking my many foibles, faults and failures. May Jesus who worked such kindness in you in the past continue to work this in you as we together await the Day of the Lord. His good work begun in you whenever that occurred for you personally will be brought to its completion on that Day as promised. Lisa and I are looking forward to returning in four years, but along with you not even Washington in all its natural splendor is our eternal home, so we too shall pray with you: *"Come Lord Jesus, come quickly! Your work in us awaits its completion at Your return. Come quickly! Amen."*