

19TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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Photograph by Carolyn Wheeler

READ: PHILIPPIANS 4:1-9

"Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord..."

REFLECT:

This week we continue with Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. It's an affectionate letter, written by Paul from prison. I love those words that open the passage, addressing "my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for..." Those of us who have been prevented all this time from seeing one another, our brothers and sisters in Christ, might identify with this wistful longing.

The restrictions on physical proximity have been on my mind today (and I'm aware that I write this from a position of privilege; I don't live alone, and by providing some childcare I've recently been able to see family and hug my nieces and nephews for the first time in quite a while).

This morning I listened to part of a programme on Radio 4 about the important benefits of touch.

(Appropriate) touch can alleviate loneliness, communicate solidarity, affirm worth and presence, and reconnect us to our bodies.

I recently ordered some wonderful greetings cards from Devon-based illustrator Rosie Johnson (www.rosiejohnsonillustrates.com), one of which bears the message "when this is finally over, I am going to hug you for so long that it gets awkward (you may want to start some arm workouts in preparation)." We're not all huggers, and that's totally ok. But if you too are missing giving and getting hugs... I feel you. And send you a virtual but heartfelt squeeze.

Besides longing, the emotion that seems to permeate Paul's letter to the Philippians is joy. One of my commentaries tells me that this short letter mentions joy or rejoicing at least 16 times. Here in verse 4, Paul writes "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." It seems a surprising instruction from a man who is in prison and expecting that he might be executed, writing to say farewell to friends and fellow-Christians living in similarly fearful, dangerous times. But Paul seems full of joy, a deep joy that's in no denial about hardship and real suffering. He encourages the Philippians to remain steadfast, and reminds them that "The Lord is near" (v.5).

I can't possibly finish without mentioning that Paul names two women, Euodia and Syntyche, as co-workers with him for the gospel. He references a disagreement between them (the nature of which is unknown to us), but notably does so from a position of equality, not hierarchy. Evidence (and there is much more besides) that the leadership of women was far more important in the early church than subsequent generations have led us to believe.

CONNECT:

- Where (if at all) are you finding joy amidst the fear, uncertainty and limitations of current circumstances?
- Most hugs are still prohibited... but why not follow Paul's lead and write a letter?

PRAY:

- For all who are anxious and all who are lonely in these strange and challenging times
- For all who find themselves in need of a hug, a hand-hold, or the physical nearness of a loved one.
- For God to bless us with a deep joy that will run like a golden thread through all things, even suffering.
- To be reminded that the Lord is near.

RESOURCES:

Our friends at Wheatley URC have a huge archive of online sermons you can listen to, and are regularly posting new resources on their website:

www.wheatleyurc.org.uk

SUPPORT:

Pauline and myself, and your elders, are here for you if you need someone to talk to, have a prayer request, or just fancy a chat! Ping us an email or give us a ring.