

## **A NUGGET OF JOYFUL COMRADESHIP**

### **Philippians 2: 19-30**

Rev. Philip Parker

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In 2001 a miniseries began its run on television. It was called 'Band of Brothers'. Based upon Stephen Ambrose's non-fiction book by the same name, it portrayed the history of "Easy" Company, 2nd Battalion, 506 Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division during World War II. In ten episodes the miniseries told the story of these soldiers from their airborne training in Georgia all the way through to the end of the war. Some of you, I'm sure, saw one or more of the episodes. Various events were dramatized from their initial training, including the various battles in which they were engaged, the liberation of a concentration camp in Germany and finally the taking of Hitler's mountain retreat, "Eagles Nest." Throughout the miniseries, including everything they experienced—the moral, mental and physical hurdles of combat—one consistent theme emerged. They were as the name implies a band of brothers. They were bound together through a common mission not only to win the war, but to also support and care for one another until victory was assured.

The same could be said of many groups of veterans who have served our nation. In fact, there may be veterans within our church who are a part of such a group. If not, I know of at least one, my friend Hal Hostetler. He was a ranger in Vietnam. Hopefully one day he will be able to visit our church and bring the message during a Sunday morning worship service. He's a retired missionary and a member of the church where I served. During the Vietnam war, he served with the Combat Trackers, a special force drawn from several different divisions that used canines to search out the enemy. Each year these Combat Tracker veterans gather together for some R and R. They enjoy each other's company, fellowshiping with one another and celebrating the comradery that comes from having served together overseas. They too are a band of brothers.

The same could also be said for Paul, Silas, Timothy and their friends back in Philippi. Although they did not serve in the legions of Rome, there was a sense of kinship that had developed among them because they were a part of another kind of army, the army of the Lord. In fact, on one occasion Paul said to Timothy in one of his letters, "Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Jesus Christ" (2 Timothy 2:3). Like the soldiers of our own day and time, they too cared about one

another and sought out opportunities to joyfully support and encourage each other. It is for that reason that I have entitled this sermon "A Nugget of Joyful Comradeship."

Now please do not be put off by the use of the word "comrade." I know that it is frequently associated with Communism and therefore, might be considered inappropriate for a Sunday morning sermon. However, there is just no other word that I could find which adequately describes the kind of joy that Paul and his companions experienced and which we too can hopefully experience as God's people. So let's take a look at what this word means. Here's the dictionary definition—"a friend, close companion, a person who has interests or concerns in common with others and shares in their activities." That's a pretty good description of the relationship that Paul enjoyed not only with Silas and Timothy, but also with the Christians in Philippi. They were partners, working steadfastly together to advance the kingdom of God. That's why Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians.

So let's take a look at this nugget of joyful comradeship in the passage of Scripture that was read this morning and see how it applies to us. Here's the first thing that joyful comradeship accomplishes. It provides us with an opportunity to express our concern for one another. Writing to the Philippians, Paul told them that he was sending Timothy in the hopes of receiving a good report when he returned. He said, "I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you" (Philippians 2:19). He was concerned about his brothers and sisters in Christ at Philippi and wanted to know how they were doing. He wanted to visit them himself and hoped to do so in the future. But his present situation, being imprisoned, did not allow for that. So he was going to do the next best thing. He was sending Timothy, who had proven himself like a son working with his father in the important task of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

I remember a situation in my own life when someone, in fact, a group of someones expressed their concern for me. A first year student in seminary, I had been informed that my father had died. I returned home to be with Mom and to make funeral arrangements. On the day of the funeral, just a few hours before the service, three of my friends from seminary arrived at our family's home in Chesapeake. They had left school and driven four hours to express their love and condolences to me and my mother. To know that someone cared that much about me and what we were facing, left an indelible impression upon my heart and mind. I can still remember the surprise and gratitude that I felt on that day, seeing those

three students getting out of their car to greet me on that morning so long ago. I found it hard to believe that they had driven all that way just to see me and to let me know that they cared about my loss. Have you ever experienced something like that? I hope so. That's what it means to experience joyful comradeship, being a part of a band of brothers who are there for you when you need them.

Here's the second thing that joyful comradeship accomplishes. It provides us with an opportunity to be truthful with one another. You don't have to hide your feelings or concerns when you are comrades in a common cause. You can express those thoughts and feelings honestly and openly. Epaphroditus had arrived from the church in Philippi with gifts for Paul, perhaps an offering that had been taken up for him and some warm clothes for the wintertime. Perhaps he had even decided to stay a while and assist Paul personally. Then things went south. He became ill. It may have been the stress of the journey or it could have been a disease he contracted at the prison where Paul was housed. In any case Paul did not sugar coat the situation. He clearly stated that Epaphroditus became seriously ill and almost died. Fortunately that didn't happen. He recovered and was now ready to return home. So Paul joyously declared, "Therefore I am all the more eager to send him so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety" (Philippians 2:28). Paul could have made light of the situation and said that his friend wasn't really very ill, or he could have not mentioned it at all, but he didn't. He told the Christians in Philippi precisely what had happened. Comradeship requires honesty, even when it hurts, even when people might take offense or be offended. I have always appreciated fellow co-workers who owned up to those times when they had made mistakes or were a part of a situation which had become difficult or maybe even disastrous.

Here's the third thing in this passage of Scripture that I want to share with you. Joyful comradeship provides us with an opportunity to commend and congratulate one another. Look at the last two verses in today's Scripture reading. Paul tells the Christians in Philippi, "Welcome him (Epaphroditus) in the Lord with great joy and honor men like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me" (Philippians 2:29-30). Earlier in his letter he had referred to Epaphroditus as "my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier" (Philippians 2:25). Clearly Paul held him in high regard and wanted the folks back home to joyously celebrate his return from the brink of death. I am reminded of that last scene in the first 'Star Wars' movie. Luke Skywalker, Hans Solo and Chewbacca have destroyed the Death Star and sent Darth Vader spinning harmlessly off into outer space. Applause erupts from a host of fellow warriors as the trio make their way to the podium to be

honored by Princess Leia. When Epaphroditus returned to Philippi, the celebration may have been a bit more subdued. Nevertheless, I know they were glad to see him and gave him a rousing welcome. That's something that we all need to do from time to time. We need to let our fellow Christians know that we appreciate them and that they are a very important part of lives.

The joy of comradeship, being a part of a band of brothers and sisters, can be summed up by one word which unfortunately does not always receive the respect it deserves. That word is "FELLOWSHIP." It means that we have a special relationship one with another because of our allegiance to Christ. So this morning after the service is over, be sure to stay for the covered dish luncheon in the fellowship hall. It will be a time to celebrate that we are bound together in Christ, fellow soldiers in the army of God, who have now gathered together for a grand and joyous reunion.