

THE SENDER, THE SENT, AND THE RECIPIENTS (Philippians 2:19-30)

In our country, we have a number of large companies that have become international giants with a global reach. In the fast-food industry, there is McDonald's. They have 37,000 locations in 120 countries. When I was in Russia, almost two years ago, the last night, before leaving Moscow and returning to America, we left our hotel, walked a couple of blocks, and went to a bustling McDonald's filled with young people.

In the beverage industry, there is Coca-Cola. Coca-Cola sells its products in over 200 countries around our world except Cuba and North Korea because we have a trade embargo with those two countries. There might be a black market where you can buy it there, but I don't know about that.

Let me tell you about another company that has experienced tremendous growth in the last 50 years. It was started by a man named Frederick Smith in 1971. On its first night of continuous operation back in 1973, this company delivered 186 overnight packages. That company is now known as FedEx, and on each business day, it handles more than 18 million packages.

FedEx's delivery routes cover every U.S. street and service more than 220 countries. In order to send well, FedEx has over 600,000 team members, operates 680 aircrafts that fly into 650 airports around the world, has 200,000 ground transportation vehicles, and 2,200 office locations. Somehow FedEx has figured out a way for customers to ship packages within a one-day turnaround. FedEx knows how to send well!

While we are not technically a business, the Church of Jesus Christ is world-wide organization with a global concern. There are 380,000 churches spread across the United States, and although the figure is unknowable, it has been estimated that there are 37 million church congregations spread across the world.

The church is not a fast-food company, but the church feeds people in every country of the world.

The church is not a soft-drink conglomerate, but wherever there are Christians they give others a cup of cold water in Jesus' name.

The church is not in the package delivery business, but we are in the message delivery business. We are to preach the gospel to every person in every place across this wide world.

Despite her many flaws, the church is growing. The church may not be growing in Europe and North America. In fact, it seems to be waning in those places, but it is most certainly growing in South America, Africa, and Asia. There are more Christians on the continents of Africa and Asia than there are in all of Europe and North America.

Looking at Africa alone: In 1900, Africa had 10 million Christians representing about 10% of the population. By 2000, one-hundred years later, the number of Christians in Africa had grown to 360 million, representing about 45% of the population. That growth has only continued. It is estimated that by 2025, there will be 760 million Christians in Africa.

We read in Matthew 9:35-38 that God is in the sending business. The word *send*

shows up 80-plus times in the NT, and the word *sent* appears approximately 190 times, and four of those occurrences are in today's text—Philippians 2:19-30.

This matter of sending necessarily involves three audiences. First, there is the Sender. Next, there are the ones who are sent. Finally, there are those who are supposed to receive the ones who have been sent. We will consider all three this morning. Today's message is entitled, "The Sender, the Sent, and the Recipients."

The Sender Sends His Very Best to Those He Loves

In our passage, Paul is the one who sends. He expresses his intention to send Timothy to Philippi. Then, by way of this letter, he lets his friends know that he is sending Epaphroditus back to Philippi. It is generally believed that Epaphroditus is the one who carried this letter with him on his return trip to Philippi.

Look at v. 19. Here, Paul says that it is his hope, his goal, to send Timothy to Philippi soon. He viewed this as a win/win situation. It would be good for Paul. He would have the comfort of knowing that a quality man, one he fully trusted, would be there ministering to a people for whom he deeply cared. In addition to that, the church in Philippi would have a man among them who, according to the text, would "be genuinely concerned for [their] welfare."

Paul wasn't willing to just send a warm body. He was going to send the best he had. He had no one more capable and no one he trusted more than Timothy, but he wasn't willing to send him just yet. Look at v. 23. Paul's case had not yet been adjudicated. There had not been an official decision, yet, as to what would become of Paul.

In the Roman world in which Paul lived, the state did not automatically feed their prisoners. They needed to have someone on the outside who cared enough about them to bring them food on a daily basis. Paul's situation was a bit different. He wasn't in a Roman prison facility. According to the last chapter of Acts, Paul was living in his own rented house while he awaited an appearance before the Emperor.

While he waited, someone had to buy the food. Someone had to bring the food. Someone had to cook the food, and it wasn't going to be the Roman guards. Maybe, the Church in Philippi had sent Epaphroditus to Paul both to bring an offering of financial assistance and to stay on and provide physical help to the aging apostle. We are not told.

Since Paul was sending Epaphroditus back to Philippi, he needed someone to be there on his behalf. Maybe that was to be Timothy. Or maybe he meant to use Timothy on other ministry errands in Rome, and there were others in the Church at Rome who could provide help. We don't know.

We do know that the last letter to come from Paul's pen is the one we call 2 Timothy. Some believe that by this time, Paul had been released. Several years of profitable ministry ensued, and then Paul was re-arrested. This final time, he was not afforded the luxury of living in his own rented quarters. Instead, he was placed in stinking, squalid Roman prison. When he writes 2 Timothy, he knows he has little time left before the axe falls, literally. Look at what he writes in 4:6-8. Then, he has some personal requests of Timothy. Look at vv. 9-22.

Paul was far more than a preacher and a church starter. He was more than an author of 13 letters of the NT. He was a mission strategist who had the authority to send people where he believed they needed to go to bring the best return for God's Kingdom work.

Where did Paul get this authority? This authority really came from two sources. One source of Paul's authority was the power of his own life that had been lived in dedication to Christ and in commitment to the task of carrying the gospel of Christ through-out the world. How could any believer say "no" to Paul after seeing and knowing all the sacrifices Paul had made?

Paul's primary authority came from the Lord Himself. Paul had been made an apostle by Jesus. The word apostle means "one who is sent." Paul had been sent by the authoritative word of Jesus, and to accomplish the things he knew needed to be done, he was sending others.

You and I are not apostles in the sense that Paul and the eleven, original disciples of Jesus were apostles. I believe, however, that we are still sent ones. On the night Jesus was arrested, He prayed to His Father. Some of what He prayed is recorded for us in John 17. In v. 18 of that chapter, Jesus prayed, "As You sent Me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." Then, after His resurrection, Jesus looked at His disciples and said to them, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so, I am sending you" (John 20:21). Then, of course, in the closing verses of Matthew's gospel, Jesus delivers what we call the Great Commission. This commission is meant for all believers. He tells us, "Go into all the world and make disciples." That is our task. We have been sent by the Sender.

God has a history of sending His best to those He loves. "For God so loved the world" that He sent His Son into the world.

God doesn't just send anybody. He sends His best. He sent Jesus. Now, He is sending those who have received His Son as their Savior and Lord. He is sending those who have indwelling Spirit in their life. He is sending those whom He has saved. He is sending those with whom He has a personal relationship.

Ed Goodman was a sales and marketing executive for the Hallmark, the greeting card company. One day in 1944 he wrote a few words on a 3 x 5 index card. What he wrote that day inspired nine words that have been the motto of the company for the last 77 years: "When You Care Enough to Send the Very Best."

God cared enough for us that He sent Jesus, and He cares enough for a lost world that He is sending you and me to take the message of Jesus to that world.

The Sent Seek to Be Their Best for the Ones They Love

Timothy was the best Paul had. Look at v. 20. In vv. 20-22, Paul contrasts the way that many live their lives with the way Timothy lived his. In v. 20, Paul affirms that Timothy was truly concerned for the welfare of the believers in Philippi. In v. 21 he laments the fact that far too many people are all about promoting themselves. He returns to Timothy in v. 22 and says, "You know Timothy's proven worth." At some point earlier, those believers in Philippi had gotten to know Timothy. They saw with their own

eyes how Paul and Timothy worked together in the cause of the gospel as though they were father and son. In a sense, they were. It was Paul who led Timothy to faith in Jesus as Lord. He was Timothy's spiritual father, his father in the faith.

Because of the love Timothy had for Paul, he sought to be the best he could be.

In v. 25, Paul begins to tell the story of Epaphroditus. In that one verse, Paul identifies him in five ways. While Timothy was Paul's spiritual son, Epaphroditus was **his spiritual brother**. If you haven't figured it out yet, in Christ we are family. You know what they say, "You pick your friends, but you are stuck with your family." We may be stuck with one another, but we are also going to stick up for one another. We're family.

He also said that they were **fellow workers**. There is a big difference between being fellow shirkers and fellow workers. Let's be co-laborers. Let's work with one another not against one another.

Paul also said that Epaphroditus **were fellow soldiers**. They fought together. They depended on one another to have their back. It is one thing to work together, but to fight together takes your relationship to an entirely new level. We have a common enemy. We have the same Commander. That means we are part of the same army.

Then, Paul tells the folks in Philippi that Epaphroditus is **your messenger**. Just as God had sent Paul, and Paul was intent on sending Timothy and had sent Epaphroditus back, the Philippians were the first ones to have sent Epaphroditus. Look at Philippians 4:18.

Epaphroditus had been sent to Rome as a messenger from Philippi to Paul, but he stayed on in Philippi with Paul as **his minister**. Paul calls him a "minister to my need." Paul doesn't specify exactly what need it was with which Epaphroditus helped him, but whatever it was, Paul was grateful. The word which is translated as *minister* can also be translated as *servant*.

If you spoke to a person who does not have a relationship with Jesus and called that person a servant, he or she would likely be offended. For the Christian, however, there could be no greater compliment than to be called a servant. It is when we are serving others that we are most like Jesus. Jesus came to seek and to serve. Here in Philippians 2, Paul told us that Jesus emptied Himself and took the form of a servant.

John Elway and Dan Marino were both NFL quarterbacks. They were both drafted in the first round of the NFL draft in 1983. They both had Hall of Fame careers. They both were enormously successful. It is interesting that Elway's last two years in the NFL were his best. He won the Super Bowl twice in those last two years while Marino's worst two years were his last two years.

What made the difference. Toward the end of their careers both men got new coaches. John Elway and his new coach became the best of friends. Dan Marino and his new coach didn't like each other. Elway ended his career with a bang—two Super Bowl wins. Marino ended his career with a thud. Both men said that it was their relationship with their coach that made the difference.

Neither men got to choose their coach, but you and I can choose our friends. Choose friends who challenge you. Choose friends whom you admire. Choose friends that have the kind of qualities that you want to have in your own life. Spend time with someone

who makes you want to be a better person, the best version of yourself as possible. Also, be that kind of person for someone else.

The Recipients Receive the Sent with God's Love

It seems that Paul was concerned as to how Epaphroditus was going to be received when he got home to Philippi. The text seems to indicate that there might be some misunderstanding as to the timing of Epaphroditus' return. We are not told just what the problem was. It all revolves on the church's original intention in sending Epaphroditus to Rome. We know he was sent to Paul to bring a gift to him from his friends in Philippi, but was there more to it. Either, the church intended him to stay with Paul and help as he could or they expected him to come right back after delivering the gift.

The fact of the matter is that Epaphroditus didn't go right back. He stayed and helped Paul. While he was there ministering to Paul, he got sick, terribly sick. Paul said that Epaphroditus almost died. Once he was well, Paul thought it best to send him back home.

Either Paul was concerned that the church would be puzzled why Epaphroditus came back earlier when he should have stayed or they might be upset that it took him so long to return. Paul offers Epaphroditus some shade in this passage. He is saying, "It's all good. I needed Epaphroditus. He was truly a help to me, but I'm sending him back so that you can see he is no longer ill. When he gets home, receive him warmly. Honor him for service well done."

Paul wants to make clear the lengths to which Epaphroditus had gone to serve him. He basically said that Epaphroditus had risked his life for Paul's sake.

One commentator made an interesting observation. In Paul's day there were those who worshipped the goddess Aphrodite. In addition to being the goddess of love, Aphrodite was also the goddess of gamblers. When a gambler made a high bid, as he threw the dice, he would cry out loudly, "Epaphroditos!" That word meant, "the favorite of Aphrodite." This was essentially a prayer that he would be blessed with the gambler's luck because the divine hand of Aphrodite would help him.

Just maybe, Paul thought of that as he wrote of the risk Epaphroditus took. He was gambling with his life to serve the Lord, but he won because the Lord's hand was with him.

Are you willing to take a risk to serve others?

Charles Swindoll tells a story of a six-year-old girl who was terribly ill and needed a blood transfusion from someone who had conquered the same illness that she was fighting. It just so happened that her nine-year-old brother was a perfect match. The parents were hesitant to ask him to be a donor because he was so young. The doctor assured the parents that the procedure was safe, and he offered to talk with the boy.

He approached the lad and simply asked if he would be brave and donate blood for his sister. The boy thought just a moment and answered, "Sure, I'll give blood for my sister."

Everything was prepared. He lay down next to his sister, and he smiled at her as the nurse stuck a needle in his arm. He then closed his eyes as a pint of his blood was collected.

After the procedure had been completed, the doctor came by to thank the boy. As tears began to run down his little cheeks, in a quivering voice, he asked, “Doctor, when do I die.”

It was only then that the doctor learned the boy mistakenly thought that by giving his blood he was sacrificing his life to save his sister. The doctor quickly explained that wasn’t the case, but he asked, “Why were you willing to risk your life for her?” The boy answered, “Because she is my sister, and I love her.”

When we love God, and when we love people, we will do whatever we can to save them and bless them. The one who lives that kind of life is worthy of respect and honor.

God means for His people to be a welcoming people. God not only sends people from us to serve in other places, He also sends people to us to serve with us here. When He does that, we are to welcome them with God’s love. We are to welcome them joyfully. We are to give them honor as God’s gifts to us.

We are commanded in Romans 16:16 to greet one another. To greet one another is to welcome one another.

I close with the story of Frances Green. She was an 83-year-old woman living on Social Security in a town just outside of San Francisco. She had been giving a dollar a year to the Republican National Convention, and she had done that eight years in a row. This was back in the 1980’s.

One day, she got an RNC fundraising letter that included an invitation to come to the White House to meet President Ronald Reagan. She didn’t notice that the invitation included an RSVP card that needed to be returned with a generous donation.

Frances scraped up every cent she had and took a four-day train ride from California to our nation’s capital. She couldn’t afford a sleeper; so, she slept in coach.

Finally, she arrived at the White House gate. There she was: a little, old woman with white hair, wearing white powder on her face, white stockings, an old hat with white netting, and white dress that had been yellowed with age.

When she gave the guard her name, he looked over his list and said that her name wasn’t there, that she couldn’t enter. Frances was heartbroken.

The man behind her in line was a Ford Motor Company executive. He took her aside. When he got her story, he told Frances to meet him right there at 9:00 the next morning. She agreed to do so. That executive spoke with Anne Higgins, a presidential aide. She promised to give her a tour of the White House, and if at possible to introduce her to the President. When she asked the president if he would meet Frances Green the next day, he said, “Of course.”

The next day was a busy day. There had been an uprising abroad. President Reagan was in and out of high-level meetings.

Frances was there at 9:00. The auto executive was there and gave her a grand tour of the White House. He took her by the oval office thinking that she might get a glimpse of the president. Just then members of the National Security Council were filing out along with high-ranking generals. The President looked out and spotted Mrs. Green. He smiled, waved her in, got up from his desk and said, “Frances! Those computers fouled up again! If I’d known you were coming, I would have come out there to get you myself.”

President Reagan invited her to sit down. They talked about their home state of California, her life, and her family. That day, the President of the United States gave Frances Green more time than he really had, but that is the kind of man President Reagan was. He took the time to welcome her and demonstrated to her that she was as important to him as Ford Motor Company executives and generous supporters.

Let us lovingly go where God send us and lovingly welcome those He sends to us.