

Partners in the Gospel

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on September 13, 2026

Covenant Presbyterian Church

I thank my God for every remembrance of you, always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I hold you in my heart, for all of you are my partners in God's grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the tender affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what really matters, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

(Philippians 1:3-11, NRSVue)

There is a moment that has happened multiple times in Covenant's partnership with Olomouc. After a little more than two hours moving east from Prague, the train begins to slow. The countryside gives way to platforms and tracks, brakes sound beneath the carriage, and through the windows appear the signs for Olomouc. Then the doors open, and Covenant travelers step down into a city at least some of them have never seen before, carrying suitcases and backpacks, gifts from Georgia, all the careful plans and expectations that have traveled with them across the ocean. And there, among the people waiting on the platform, are members of our sister congregation. Faces become names. Hands are extended. Luggage is gathered up. Before long, these visitors from Athens will be sitting at Czech tables, sleeping under Czech roofs, walking unfamiliar streets with people who are already beginning to make room for them in the ordinary fabric of their lives.

I love that image, because it already says something about the kind of partnership this is. Our travelers arrive with gifts and plans, ready to offer something of themselves, and the first thing that happens is that they are welcomed, taken in, and made room *for*. Before anyone has taught or served or accomplished anything, the relationship has already begun in the grace of giving and receiving.

Paul certainly seems to think so. His letter to the Philippians begins with some of the warmest language anywhere in the Bible: "I thank my God every time I remember you." "I hold you in my heart." "You all share in God's grace with me." Distance has not made these people remote to him. Memory has *faces* in it. Affection has crossed the miles.

And then Paul gives a name to what binds them together. He thanks God for their "sharing in the gospel," their *koinonia* in the gospel. The Greek word can mean fellowship, communion, participation, partnership. It is much richer than simply having cordial relations or cooperating

on a useful project. Paul is describing people who have somehow been drawn into a shared life in Christ, whose faithfulness has become entangled with his own. *Partners in the gospel*.

That's the language Covenant chose, in effect, almost twenty years ago. Our leaders already knew something about mission trips. Covenant people had traveled to Mexico and Honduras and had done good, faithful work. But in 2008, Laurie Anderson and Helen Epps encountered a different model being developed among Presbyterian and Czech churches: not simply a mission trip, but a *congregational partnership*. They attended a conference in Annapolis where churches worshiped together, learned the history of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren, and explored what it might mean for two congregations to enter a relationship in which neither existed merely as the project of the other. Out of that gathering, Covenant was matched with a church in Olomouc. And the partnership that followed seems to have understood the difference from the beginning.

There is, of course, something Americans have to watch in ourselves whenever we enter relationships across borders. We tend to know what we have: resources, institutions, money, the English language, organizational confidence. We can begin a relationship by asking, with perfectly good intentions, "What can we bring? What can we teach? What can we do?" But one of the beautiful things about this partnership is that Covenant has never understood Olomouc chiefly that way. Even the English Camp – the activity that might most obviously look like Americans flying overseas to provide something others **need** – knows that its primary purpose is different. The first goals are building relationships and promoting understanding across cultures. English practice comes after that.

Think about that. You cross an ocean carrying a language you know, the lingua franca of the world, and soon experience that your language was never close to the most important gift in your suitcase. That seems very close to Paul's *koinonia*.

Over the years Covenant people have gone to Olomouc and Olomouc people have come here. Our travelers have been welcomed into homes and gathered around Czech tables. Their members have sat around ours. Gifts have moved in both directions – so much so that the travel guide that was developed for the partnership rather charmingly warns that Covenant visitors frequently return wishing they had carried more gifts because their hosts have been so generous with them. There have been English Camps and church conferences, shared meals and outings, visits to ministries, long conversations, worship, laughter, friendship. The relationship has accumulated names and faces.

You arrive carrying gifts, and someone puts a gift into your hands. That is a lovely correction to so much of the way the world understands giving. Grace has never been very interested in keeping the accounts straight. And the deepest gift, of partnership, is not finally anything we can pack into a suitcase.

Listen again to Paul's prayer for the Philippians: "This is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight." That is an extraordinary combination. Love,

Paul says, can *deepen* knowledge. Love can *sharpen* perception. We become capable of seeing something because we have learned to care for someone we didn't know before.

And Covenant has already seen this happen. Valerie Stone remembers standing at Communion in Olomouc in 2019, shoulder to shoulder in a circle, unexpectedly moved by the quiet act of receiving bread and cup together. Four years later, during the 2023 partnership conference and pilgrimage, she began to notice the chalice *everywhere* – in churches, historic spaces, artwork – and to understand its long place in the Bohemian Reformation, when the cup became a sign of the conviction that the *whole* people of God should share fully in Communion. A familiar Christian act began to carry another people's history, another set of voices, another witness to grace.

But perhaps the most revealing lesson was simpler. Like many of us in American mainline churches, Valerie had spent plenty of time wondering what has happened to many churches in America over the last generation, watching numbers decline and old assumptions about Christianity's place in public life fall away. In conversations with Czech Christians, she encountered people for whom being a small minority was hardly a newly arrived crisis. Faith had *long* been practiced without the expectation that the church would occupy the center of cultural life. She came home finding herself drawn toward a better question: "How can we Christians be relevant and helpful to each other and to the world?"

That's what another church can do for us. It does not hand us an answer to our problems. It can change the questions we ask.

Every congregation hears the gospel from somewhere. We hear it here, in Athens, Georgia, within American culture, shaped by our particular history, our assumptions, our habits, our strengths and blind spots. That's unavoidable. There is no view from nowhere. But it is very easy to forget that our angle of vision is just that – an angle.

Then Christ gives us *another* church: a congregation in Moravia, Christians worshiping in another language, carrying another history, living within a very different religious landscape. Someone who has learned to hear the gospel from a place where I have never stood may hear something I need. They don't have some other gospel. But the gospel we both share is larger than the angle from which any one congregation can see it.

That, I think, is one of the most important gifts of Christian partnership. Another church can show us colors within the gospel that our own light makes harder to see. And perhaps, through our life here, we may offer them something similar. Christ gives different members of the body to one another precisely because none of us was ever meant to contain the whole within ourselves.

Even the music in worship today offers a small expression of that truth. Some of what we hear comes from Czech composers. Another culture enters the sound of our praise. We don't

become less ourselves because another voice has joined ours. The music becomes *larger*. Our faith does too.

This is where Paul's language becomes so beautiful to me: "I hold you in my heart." He doesn't say simply, "I admire your church" or "I support your work." He says, "I hold you in my heart." There is vulnerability in that. People you hold in your heart are capable of changing you.

Their joy *reaches* you. Their sorrow *unsettles* you. Their questions may expose assumptions you had never thought to examine. Their courage may strengthen something in you that had grown tired. Their way of seeing Christ may open a window in a room you didn't know had grown dim. You listen differently to someone you hold in your heart.

And perhaps that's one way Covenant's vision has already been enlarged through Olomouc. The worldwide church is no longer merely an idea we affirm in a creed or give lip-service to on World Communion Sunday. It has a railway station. It has kitchen tables. It has names like Jan and Dagmar, Iva and Jana, Honza, Roman and Adela. It has people who have stood waiting for Covenant travelers to arrive, and people who have crossed the Atlantic to sit among us here.

Next summer, if plans unfold as we hope, another group from Covenant will make that journey. They will pack suitcases. They will carry gifts. They will board the train in Prague and watch the countryside move past the windows until Olomouc comes into view. And I hope they will take good things with them. But one of the lessons of those who have gone before is that the journey can keep growing within you long after the luggage has been put away.

What will they have heard because someone welcomed them into a conversation? What will they notice about their own faith because for a little while they prayed and ate and walked through another part of Christ's church? What question will follow them back across the ocean? What friendship will make the map look different? What word of the gospel will sound deeper because they heard it spoken with another accent?

"I thank my God every time I remember you," Paul writes. "I hold you in my heart." What a gift it is, across all the miles between Athens and Olomouc, to be able to say the same – to the glory of God! Amen.