A Good Work
Philippians 1:3–11
Sunday, November 15, 2026 (Consecration)

Let us pray: May your word be spoken, Lord, *to* us, and then *through* us, in Christ. Amen.

In the past, we have brought in guest preachers on Consecration Sunday. And I always loved that, not just because it gave me the week off from preparing a sermon so that I could get other things done, but because it gave us a chance to hear a different voice and different thoughts, an outside perspective, and that can be a good thing. But there is one thing guest preachers *can't* do, and that is *speak specifically to you*; to *who we are* as a church. They can speak in broad terms about life and faith and things that might resonate with you. But they don't *know* you. They don't know your stories, what you're dealing with, the questions that you're asking. Consecration Sunday is a time when we give thanks for all the things that your giving has made possible, but how can they *do* that if they don't specifically *know* what your giving has made possible?

Paul *knew* the church in Philippi. He is the one who *started* the church, who first introduced them to Jesus. He knew their names, their stories, and their struggles. He *loved* them. At this point, Paul is imprisoned by the Roman Empire. He *wants* to come and see his friends in Philippi, but he *can't*. But they have put together some kind of offering for him (we don't know exactly what it was – money, food, whatever – we don't know. But whatever it is, it means *so much* to Paul. It shows him that they love him, that they care about him, they're thinking about him, at a time when he probably felt pretty isolated and alone. So he writes them this letter, in part, to say *thank you*.

Last week we heard Paul talking to the Corinthians about *why* they should give, but this week he is talking to the Philippians about *what their giving has made possible*. So that's what I want to do today. I want to talk about what your giving has made possible. Paul starts off saying, "I thank my God every

time I remember you," because of all the things that they have done. So I want to tell you why I thank my God when I think of *you* and the things that *you* have done.

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I think that with St. John's, it always starts with the fact that we give 20% of our budget each year to mission and ministries outside the life of our church. That means that this year at least $135,736 goes out into the world to help people. It goes to things like Philabundance and the Great Valley Food Cupboard and Rise Against Hunger and the Paper Mill Food Hub to feed people locally and around the world. It goes to Broad Street Ministry in Philadelphia to help people experiencing homelessness and extreme poverty. It goes to Gemma Services to provide education, child welfare, and residential programs for children and teens who have experienced trauma. It goes to Young Lives to help teen mothers and Case for Smiles to help chronically ill children in hospitals. It goes to a hospital in Haiti and a preschool in South Africa. It goes to Cornerstone Christian Academy in Philadelphia and La Estacion in Cuernavaca, Mexico. It goes to hygiene kits for people trying to recover from natural disasters. And *so much more*. *Twenty percent* of our budget goes out into the world to help people who need it. That is *amazing*, and I thank my God for that.

But it's actually *more* than 20%. That's just what we *budget*. But through things like the Deacons' Fund and the Pastor's Discretionary Fund, we are able to help people with emergency needs that we can't plan for. And I really wish I could talk to you in specifics about how those funds help people, but for the sake of confidentiality, I can't. But I *can* tell you that it has paid multiple months of rent to help people stay in their homes. It has provided food for people who are homeless or out of work. It has helped people keep their lights and their heat on. It has helped a single mother who was struggling to get diapers for her baby.

This year we had a crisis situation where someone in the church found themself without a place to live. I was sitting in my office trying to figure out how we could help them, when the phone rang. It was someone else in the church saying that they were sending the church an unexpected gift of $6,000 to use wherever it was needed most. We said, "Actually, would you be okay if we used it for *this*?" And, of course, they were. You will *never know* how much that helped someone when they needed it most.

There is another situation that I *really* wish I could tell you about, but here's the best I can do. Another crisis situation arose where someone in the church needed money that they just didn't have to keep their life from getting completely derailed. A small group of people heard about that need and collected over $12,000 in a matter of days to help this person. Again, you will *never know* the difference that the generosity of this church made in someone's life. And all of that is *on top of* the 20% that we give to mission. I thank my God, and I thank *you*.

I thank my God when I think about our leadership; the Elders, Deacons, and Trustees who give so much of their time and energy to serve this church faithfully and well. The thoughtful conversations that I have heard around the table. The respect and love with which they treat each other. The way they *listen* to each other. The way they lead by example. When we started off this stewardship season, Jim Tiede (our Stewardship Trustee), asked the Elders, Deacons, and Trustees if they would consider making their pledges early, to set the tone for the congregation. He hoped for a good turnout. *100%* of our leadership responded and have already pledged to support the life and ministry of this church next year. To those officers who are here, *thank you*.

But it's not just about money. I thank my God when I think about our youth and the person who works with them. The trips to Montreat in North Carolina and Massanetta in Virginia, where they discovered new things about God, themselves, and each other. For some of them, it was a big step in faith to even

go. But every single one of them was glad they did. Friendships were made and deepened. Their *faith* was deepened. Then they came home and led worship and shared their experiences with you. They started a Wednesday Night Bible study that they came out to in droves. They came to eat at Supper at St. John's beforehand, and their table was a constant source of laughter filling up the Fellowship Hall. Horse Show Parking had a record year, raising over $31,000 in ten days. But more than the money that was raised, so many of you gave your time to work shifts. Mark Ntow was there almost every single day working. Dick Oliver once again showed his Tetris-like mastery of parking cars on Grand Prix Night. That event only works if you show up to help, and *every year* you do. *Thank you*.

I thank my God when I think about our worship. The choir and Joy Messengers and Bells and Brass that work so hard to provide music that helps draw us into the presence of God. For our A/V team – John Senior, John Adams, Barbara McClintick, Andy Walsh, and Michael Kaskey – who have created a professional-quality livestream that lets so many people stay connected to their church family. I think about things like World Communion Sunday, when Pastor Norma Paz from La Iglesia Renacer in Parkesburg came to lead worship with me. She read scripture in Spanish, and I read it in English. We served communion together, her in Spanish and me in English. It embodied everything that World Communion Sunday is about.

I also think about things like last week when 10-year-old Logan Carty read scripture. Not just the fact that he *wanted* to do it, but also the fact that you created space where he felt comfortable doing that. And the week before that when Alex Engheta was our stewardship speaker and shared what he is grateful for in his church family. Not just the two cups of coffee filled to the brim, but also you, his friends, who make him feel loved and supported and happy. I am so proud to be part of a church that creates space for people of different ages and abilities to share their gifts.

One more word about the livestream. We have people from Florida to Maine to Nebraska (and other places I don't even know about) joining us for worship each week. But I had a conversation with someone last week that absolutely overwhelmed me. This person shared our livestream with her cousins who live out of state. They started watching every week. Then they came up here the other month to worship with us in person. And now even *more* members of this person's family are watching. And they talk about it with each other afterward. And through those conversations and the shared experience of worshipping together, this person told me, "It reconnected me with them and *gave me my family back*."

I thank my God when I think about Barbara McConnell starting this whole new thing around birthdays. Putting everyone's birthdays in the bulletin and weekly email so that we can share that joy with one another. The birthday cake on the first Sunday of each month. It's such a simple thing that has had such a huge impact, helping us feel more connected to each other. She goes off Session in April, and we cannot let that end with her term. So if anyone wants to help her carry that on, I know she would love that, and we would *all* be grateful.

I thank my God when I think about the immigration conversation that we had back in July. Members of our church family from Colombia and Iran and Hong Kong and Ghana shared with us about their experiences leaving the land of their birth and coming to America. Taking part in that conversation was an incredibly personal and vulnerable thing for them to do. But you all have helped create a space where they felt comfortable doing that. They shared their hopes and their fears and the challenges they faced. It helped us know them and understand them better and grow closer to them, but it also helped us put a deeply personal face on the idea of immigration, something that can so easily be turned into a nameless, faceless "issue." Their presence here has made the life of our church family *better*, so that we cannot imagine this church *without them*.

One of the people who took part in that conversation, Katy Love, was baptized here in February, and it has been our privilege to walk with her as she starts this new life with Christ. Some of you don't know this, but last year I set a goal for myself. I said, "I want to do at least one adult baptism in 2025." Well, the year ended without an adult baptism, and I thought, "Well, okay, maybe later." And then on January 11, Katy and Donn showed up. And right after worship ended, she came up and said, "I want to be baptized!" And I thank my God for that.

I thank my God when I think about Sandy Forbes approaching us and asking if a group she is part of called *Neighbors for Democracy* could use our space for one of their gatherings. It's just a group of people from our community who meet to talk about important political issues facing our country and how we can work together to address them. That one request has turned into monthly gatherings of over 50 people, many of them representing different churches and faith communities in our area, and it has raised the possibility of our church collaborating with their churches on some things. When we got that initial request, our Trustees could have said, "Ooh, I don't know. A group holding political conversations here; that could get messy." But they didn't. They enthusiastically said yes and opened up our space to the community, and it has turned into a really beautiful thing.

I thank my God when I think about our new signage and logo and branding. Not just the *money* that made that stuff possible, but the time and energy and creativity that so many people have poured into it. (Jim Little and Steve Scolari especially deserve our appreciation…they got in *way* deeper than they ever thought!) Lisa Howell working so hard with a graphic designer to create this new logo and color scheme. Wanda Odom and Laurie Cato working to rethink our website and social media and expand our marketing presence. All of this is to help the community get to know us better so that we can share the story of Jesus Christ with them, and it has been working.

There is so much else that I thank my God for about this church, but I have to stop somewhere, so I'm going to stop with this. Yesterday we had a memorial service for David Sheep. David was a member of this church for 30 years. He served as a Deacon and at one point was the President of the Deacons. David was a *great* guy. He was outgoing and energetic. He always wanted to help people. And he loved this church so much. But David was struggling with addiction and mental health issues that a lot of people didn't know about. He tried for over a decade to get better, but it was just too much, and he died in June. He had isolated himself from everyone who loved him, including his children. And at first there wasn't even going to be a service. It was just too painful for them. When they finally came to me and said, "We're ready to plan a service," they didn't have a burial plot, and they didn't know what to do with his ashes. Years ago – way before I came here – a man named Bob Buller left a $5,000 gift to St. John's to be used specifically to help people who could not afford funeral services or burials. We were able to take money from that fund and pay for a spot in the Memorial Garden out back, along with the engraving on his headstone. You, his church family, made it possible for him to rest eternally in the one place that gave him peace in the midst of all his struggles. And I thank my God for that.

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All of these things we've talked about, they're just the beginning. Paul says to the Philippians, "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." He is saying, "God has started something good here among you. And God will not let that good thing fail. God will give you everything you need to see it through to completion." And God will do the same thing for us. Because if we are sincerely trying to do God's will here, to do what God is calling us to do – to reflect God's unconditional love to *all* people, to grow in our faith, to welcome all people with love, to serve those in need, to create a spiritual home where people are welcomed and known and valued and loved and find belonging, so that they can grow in their faith and go out to serve others – God will give us everything we need to do that. And we can *all* thank our God for *that*.

So my prayer for you is the same as Paul's for the Philippians: "That your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best, 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." So that, years from now, someone we might never meet will thank their God for *us* and say, "Because of their love and generosity, I came to know Jesus Christ, and my life was transformed." May the one who began a good work among us do *that*, not for *our* glory, but for *God's*. Amen.