

Today marks the beginning of our Fall Growth Group Series. For those not familiar, Growth Groups are our congregation's small group ministry. These groups meet for two semesters each year – one in the Spring, usually after Easter and one in the Fall, usually September and October. The first week that the groups will meet will actually be following September 17th. But today is the sermon for discussion that week. Which means that you still have a full week to sign up by the time the first group meets next Sunday after church. Our theme for this Fall semester, as you can see printed on your worship folder cover is LIVINGHISTORY, a look at selections from Paul's letter to the Philippians.

You see, as Paul wrote his letter to these dear fellow Christians, he encouraged them to live their life of faith in view of the life of Christ, lived for them and now through them. Again and again Paul takes aspects of Jesus' history – His Story – and connects them to our own stories, our own lives, lived for Jesus.

A new enhancement this Fall is a partnership with Christ Lutheran, our sister congregation in North St. Paul and Hugo. We are working together to design and provide resource materials for this series. This would allow people from either congregation to join in groups from either congregation that might be meeting at a time that best fits your schedule. Our prayer is that even more WELS congregations in the Northeast Metro will join us in this small group effort. But the point is still:

- to grow closer together as brothers and sisters in faith while growing closer to our Lord;
- to spend time with our fellow believers in encouraging discussion and thoughtful prayer;
- to learn to talk about our faith in a comfortable and on-threatening setting;
- and ultimately to make us more comfortable talking about our faith in any circumstance.

And so, in many ways, these Growth Groups are looking to do what Paul was looking to do through his letter to the Philippians. He wrote, *To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* And so, as we begin this series together, please, join me in prayer...

Are you familiar with the 30-second hug? For those who aren't familiar, the 30-second hug is technique used to heal and restore relationships. For example, a child whose afternoon suddenly went from fun to frustration because a parent decided it was time to mow the lawn...might need a 30-second hug. A spouse who arrives home from work with a harsh word and a haggard expression...might need a 30-second hug. An accident victim, reeling from shock and devastation...might need a 30-second hug.

And before we stoic Upper-Midwesterners start to twitch at the thought of a sustained hug for *that long*, we all have to admit that there is something about a hug that heals, restores, grounds, lifts up, warms, and encourages. And this isn't just a bunch of emotional claptrap. After about 20 seconds, the hug causes a release of the neurotransmitter known as Oxytocin, acting within the brain to help to help it process information and feelings. Through its release, the person knows that everything is safe and that there is no need to worry. It helps us build positive connections with others.

And so, frustration is relieved, harshness is softened, and shock is eased...all with a hug. And if you don't believe me, embrace a loved one, count off the seconds one at a time, feel them physically relax at about 20 seconds, and then appreciate the change and each other for the last ten. I think you'll agree with the psalmist: we are *fearfully and wonderfully made* by our loving and creative God.

Today and in the weeks ahead, you'll see a written version, if you will, of a 30-second hug. ♦ As Paul writes to the Philippians, he looks to renew and strengthen ♦ not only his relationship with his fellow believers, but more importantly, their

relationship with their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And he does this first by delving into a little history.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

I know, history is not everyone's favorite subject, especially when history reveals something about us or our family or our nation or religion of which we are ashamed. But remember, LIVINGHISTORY is about living His story ♦ not our story. Among the people receiving Paul's letter would have been Lydia, the seller of purple dye who welcomed Paul into her home on his first visit Philippi, as well as the jailer, who nearly took his own life when he thought that Paul and his fellow prisoners had escaped during an earth quake. They and others like them, including us today, need to hear that our salvation doesn't depend on our story, ♦ it depends on His story. And His story, is all about you and me.

Confused? Just listen to Jesus as *he* prays: ***I pray... for those who will believe in me through [the] message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them. (John 17:20-26)***

I don't know about you, but that sounds like a loving hug that goes well beyond 30 seconds. That's hug that lasts

throughout this life and into eternity. It's a hug that has changed who we are by nature into who we have become in Christ. He wraps us in his arms of forgiveness. He pulls us close through the water and Word of baptism. He changes us from within through his life-giving Word and his life-nourishing Holy Supper. He bids us leave all of our cares and worries on him. And he frees ♦ us to live each day imitating His story as the person he has made each of us to be within the confidence and eternal safety of his divine hug.

Paul described this safe place when he wrote: ***I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.***

The Greek words there for heart and affection ♦ are the words *cardio* (from which we get our "heart" words like cardiogram and cardiologist, and *splangkna* which describes the seat of our emotions, you know the feelings the reach right down into your guts. Together, these words describe the deep, inner feelings of a faith connection between partners in the gospel as an intense, inner reflection of the intense love that our Savior Jesus has had for you and me, a love that compelled him to go to the cross for us and our salvation.

That is His story, a story of the ♦ love of Christ. And now, as we look to share his love by living His story of love, we pray Paul's prayer at the close of our text: We pray, dear Father ***that our love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that we may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ-- to the glory and praise of you. Amen.***