

Consider Joy

Sermon Text: Philippians 2:12-18

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I. Threats to unity in Philippi

One day four harried employees from four different departments rushed into the workroom to use the copier at the same time. The person from Accounts Payable said, “Getting our bills paid is top priority, so I should go first.” Accounts Receivable replied, “If we don’t get our receivables collected, you won’t have the money to pay the bills. I need to go first.” The person from Sales chimed in, “Unless I sell something, there won’t be any receivables to collect to pay the bills. Obviously, I should go first.” The fourth person, who up to this time hadn’t said a word, quietly mentioned that she was from Payroll. All of the others quickly stepped aside to let her use the copier.

It is a joyful thing when people are united in a common cause – even if the cause is making sure they get their paychecks. This morning as we continue our sermon series on the fruit of the Spirit, we turn our attention to joy. In fact, Paul’s letter to the Philippians has been called the “epistle of joy,” so often does he use some form of the word. But the apostle was also concerned. If you look back through the earlier sections of this letter, you will see that there were issues with unity in the Philippian church.

That’s one of the challenges of understanding Paul’s letters in the New Testament – we only have access to his side of the conversation. In many cases, we have to deduce what was happening in the churches to which he wrote. But if you start at the beginning of this letter from the apostle to this church family with whom he shared much joy and do a little reading between the lines, you will see that Paul was concerned that lack of unity was becoming a problem in Philippi.

In chapter one, verse nine, Paul writes that his prayer is that the Philippians’ love will overflow more and more. His unstated concern is that their love is beginning to flow less and less. Then later in first chapter, verse twenty-seven, the apostle says that whether he is present or absent he wants them to stand firm in one spirit, and strive together side by side with one mind for the gospel. This same concern returns in the beginning of chapter two, verse two, when the apostle encourages the church family to be of the same mind, have the same love, and be in full accord. In other words, Paul perceived threats to the unity of the Philippian church.

We see the issue surface again in the middle of the second chapter, in the verses we read today. Paul just finished writing about the humble servanthood of Christ, and he connects what he has said about the Lord with his concern for unity in Philippian church by the word, “therefore,” in verse twelve. Therefore – since Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, humbled himself and was obedient to the point of dying on the cross for you and me. Therefore – work out your Christian faith in fear and trembling. Live out your faith in humility, considering others more important than yourselves. Don’t be prideful. Be humble and show your humility in how you work out your faith together. Paul addresses the threats to unity in Philippi by calling them to humble, united action as a faith family.

II. Unity is not uniformity

Understand that the unity Paul encourages should not be confused with uniformity. Paul does not say that we should all look the same, think the same, talk the same, and act the same. He did not call the Philippians to fit some particular mold in order to be true Christians. The apostle understood that God created each and every person unique, yet in his image. Paul also understood our human tendency to pride and arrogance – thinking that others should agree with us or at least appreciate our genius.

That's why Paul calls the Philippians and you and me to work out our salvation with fear and trembling: to live out our faith in humility; to understand that God created and loves each of us as unique – one of a kind. The unity to which Paul calls us as a church family is not based on uniformity. It is based on a biblical understanding of one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, each reflecting facets of God's image. The apostle calls us to join together as a family of faith and work out our salvation together – through our differences, with humility. We make this commitment to one another because we are confident that God is at work in each of us. Thus, one of us cannot think ourself better than another, because God loves us all and is at work in each of our lives.

A striking example of what Paul is trying to convey is Mother Teresa. She was a nun in India who was teaching in a comfortable Catholic school with students from comfortable families. She was riding the train on her way to a comfortable holiday at the beach when she had an encounter with God that led her to begin her work ministering to the poorest people in the worst slums of Calcutta. The human need that she and her Missionaries of Charity encountered on a daily basis was almost unimaginable. The people among whom she ministered were considered the dregs of their society. And yet, the tiny nun's perspective was that each person with whom she locked eyes was created and loved by God. She always tried to see in them the image of Christ. And she attempted to minister to them with the same love as if they were Jesus himself. That is the kind of perspective that Paul is talking about when he calls each of us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. Let us see Christ in one another.

But there are very few people like Mother Teresa. The reality is that in the church we don't always agree on everything. Sometimes we have arguments. We may see important issues differently. We get concerned over denominational decisions. It can be hard to love one another. But when we understand that God has created each of us uniquely, when we truly believe that God is actively at work in each other's lives, then we can work through our differences with humility. We can honor one another even if we don't agree.

For example, our congregation offers three different worship services. Each service is different and that could create a challenge for us as a church. We have to resist the temptation to believe one service is better than another. If you consistently attend this service, then you probably like it best. That's great. We work hard each week to offer God our very best in every one of our services. And I hope you truly connect with God in worship. I love all three services. And what I love most is that our congregation understands that people praise God in different ways, so we offer choices in worship style. We are united in that decision to offer choices in worship, but our preferences are not uniform. Unity is not based on uniformity.

III. Unity is unusual

When we do the things that Paul talks about – when we work out our faith with humility, when we strive to see Christ in one another, when we work through our differences as a family of faith, then we shine like stars. We experience joy. Unity is such an unusual characteristic for groups of people that it stands out. When I think about my experiences with various types of organizations – businesses, parent groups, social clubs, service organizations, even churches, I think about power plays and backbiting and gossip and all kinds of destructive stuff. Sadly, those things are common. And for that reason when our church family works together in joyful unity, we shine like stars.

Please notice the word that I chose is the same one that Paul chose. When we WORK together in joyful unity. It takes effort to remain united as a church family, because there are always going to be differences that threaten to pull us apart. So we will continue to work towards unity as a church family. It is not a quality that we will achieve and then switch to cruise control. Unity in a family of faith is like unity in marriage – it takes work to maintain and move ahead. The natural tendency for groups of people is toward disunity – cliques and factions, separation and distance. Unity is unusual and it takes continual time and attention to maintain.

But when we invest that time and effort, when we work together knowing that we don't agree on everything, when we truly believe that Christ is at work in each person here, then our church family exudes joy that is attractive to others. So many people are looking for genuine community, for people who honestly care for one another, for a joyful church family that is truly committed to each other in spite of our differences.

The core of our joy and our unity is a shared commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. That commitment is the one and only qualification for membership in this or any Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It is a commitment to the person of Jesus Christ – to his leadership in our lives, to the belief that he is God's only Son – the one who reconciles us with the Father. The basis for our unity is the joy of shared faith in Christ.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit we build on that foundation by working together to do what God calls us to do: equipping disciples for the service of Christ. So if you find yourself feeling discouraged about denominational decisions, or cultural currents seeming to push against the Church, or a worship style that doesn't agree with your preference – I invite you to action. Get to work. Get involved. There is too much ministry to be done for God's Kingdom to have talented folks like you sitting on the sidelines. The church of Jesus Christ, and this family of faith, is in need of joyful participants in ministry. It is as we put our faith in Christ to work in ministry that many of our differences melt away.

As our faith moves into action we discover unity as brothers and sisters in Christ. We discover unity when we work together to feed the hungry in the Food Pantry. We discover unity when we invest our time in the lives of children and youth at Vacation Bible School or the Day of Hope. We discover unity when we pray together for mission partners, like the Winklers. We discover unity when we go on a mission trip to Nicaragua or Honduras or DeLand. We discover unity and we experience joy.

So I ask you – are you observing from the sidelines or are you a joyful participant in the work of reaching others with the good news of Jesus Christ? Unity is found in joyful participation in God's work. Sisters and brothers, consider joy for it is in joyful service that we find unity in Christ. Amen.