

God is at Work in You!

Meditation on Philippians 2:1-13

Oct. 1, 2017

World Communion Sunday

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing (or fellowship) in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. ¹² Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

I am at a new dentist and the hygienist, a woman in her late 20s/early 30s, maybe, had her fingers in my mouth, positioning pieces of cardboard so she could take X-rays. She makes small talk, but I can't answer because she is putting things in my mouth... I am nervous,

because I haven't been to the dentist in 3 years, well, maybe 4, and I love candy. I'm thinking, "How long is this going to take? How much will this cost?"

She asks where I work, what I do. I manage to tell her I am a pastor, hoping that's enough, and I can get home before dark. Then she starts sharing her personal testimony. Normally, I relish this sort of conversation. But I am feeling vulnerable--wishing I were anywhere else but in the dentist chair. Still, I listen and nod as she tells me how much she loves her new church. She attends "Elevation Church." The pastor is wonderful. Young! He preaches messages that really speak to her, with catchy phrases that are easy to recall, such as "When it Rains, God Reigns." She doesn't know the denomination. She goes to the Gleason Performing Arts Center at FIT and watches the service on a big screen. She doesn't know other people there, though greeters welcome her when she arrives and someone introduces the program. If she is tired on Sunday morning or isn't free to attend the service in person, she watches it on the Web. There's an Elevation Church app for your cell phone!

That evening, Jim and I check out Elevation Church on the Internet. They have an amazing website, with video clips of nice-looking young people, worshipping in a darkened auditorium, with professional lighting, sound, and so forth. The mega, multi-site church is based in Charlotte, NC, and though I can't find it at the church's website, it's Southern Baptist. Thirty-seven-year-old Pastor Steven Furtick founded Elevation Church in 2006. He has written some books, and he and his

wife, Holly, live in a 16,000 square foot home that has made national news. The church has at least 17 locations where you can, sure enough, go and watch the service on theater-type screens--Raleigh, Roanoke, Greater Toronto, Winston-Salem and 9 in Charlotte. This doesn't count the many Southern Baptist Churches, such as one about a mile from our home, which host an Elevation service video on a weeknight, in addition to traditional services Sunday mornings. Elevation Melbourne, where my hygienist goes, offers two "weekend worship experiences," the website says, at 9:30 and 11 a.m. Sundays. Chad Cooper is the "campus pastor" but he doesn't preach or lead worship.

Jim, peering over my shoulder at Elevation's website, shakes his head. I am drawn to click on the tab with the online store where you can shop for T-shirts, sweatshirts, baseball caps, Pastor Furtick's books, and other stuff. I have mixed emotions. First, I am happy the church is effectively reaching out to young adults. I am also worried. Is this what young adults are looking for-- a "worship experience"? This seems like marketing Christianity as entertainment, rather than discipleship. This doesn't fit with Christ's humble, self-giving example for His Church, united in Him, called to love and serve God, one another and the world. You can't be the Church without building relationships, spending time with people, growing in love and service together. But the Church in the 21st century, I am sad to say on this World Communion Sunday, is scandalously divided. The walls between denominations and other Christian groups are a far cry from Christ's prayer that His disciples would be one.

Living out your faith in Christ's humble example, dwelling in unity, is Paul's message to the Philippians. Unity is a recurring theme in his letters. He says, "make my joy complete, be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." Of all his letters to churches, Philippians is the most affectionate and least critical. In 2:12, he says, "you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence." Compare this tone to his letter to the Galatians, in 3:1, "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?"

In his urging of the Philippians to live in unity, some think that they might have been struggling to carry on without Paul. For the church that he founded in 49 CE was enduring persecution. Paul probably wrote this letter of friendship in the early 60s CE while he was on house arrest in Rome. This was the first church founded in Europe.

The key to living in unity, says Paul, is this: imitate the humility of Christ. I'm always touched by this passage. It seems to me that if everybody lived this way, it would be the end to all conflicts. This love is divine; it does nothing from "selfish ambition or conceit" as Paul says in v. 3. This love regards others as better than ourselves. He goes on in v. 4, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

This divine love is possible through the Spirit-- living in us, changing our hearts, changing our minds. At the beginning of this passage, Paul says, "If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, and sharing or fellowship in the Spirit, any compassion or sympathy..." This "if" is more like "since." This is assurance that the Church has all these things in Jesus Christ. We have access to the "same

mind” as Jesus Christ, as Paul teaches in v. 5. We can know God’s will for the situations we find ourselves in! We hold on to promises such as Philippians 2:13--that God is at work in us, even when we can’t see any progress in ourselves! God is at work in you! He will enable us to do his will--and be pleasing to him!

Now, notice how the text looks different beginning in v. 6? Paul may be quoting from a hymn that he or another person wrote. This beautiful hymn tells of our God who humbled and emptied himself to become human, like us, and died on a cross, suffering in human form for our sake. Then we see a glimpse of the heavenly realm. Christ, our King of Kings, exalted on the throne of God. Name above all names, every knee shall humbly bow, every tongue confess: “Jesus is Lord!”

I was tired and still had 2 meditations and s to finish when I went to “Gift From the Sea,” the Women’s Retreat yesterday at Riverside Presbyterian. I didn’t want to miss the blessings! I didn’t want to miss the joy! I knew that gathering with other Christian women would bring me comfort and strength. I knew it would help me to put aside my own worries and problems and look to the needs and interests of others. I would feel refreshed, renewed.

I experienced the encouragement in Christ, the consolation of love, compassion and sympathy, the sharing or fellowship of the Spirit. I was there for breakfast and a high tea. We worshiped, danced, sang. We laughed at a skit about Jesus bringing peace in the storms of our lives We played games, and made sand dollar necklaces. We heard personal testimonies, telling the story of a channeled welk, protecting itself by

withdrawing into its shell. We learned that it might be easier for us to wear a mask, rather than be vulnerable, taking risks by opening ourselves to new friendships. And the moonshell, a reminder to take time to just breathe, be still, draw in the love of God so that we may share it with others. I am continually reminded when I am with my sisters that the Church is all about building relationships, growing in love.

Friends, trust in the promise that God is at work in us!

God is at work in you!

He will enable us to do his will--and be pleasing to him!

Let us pray. Holy One, thank you for humbling yourself, emptying yourself of divinity and taking on a fragile human form because you love us. Thank you for suffering and dying on a cross so that we could be forgiven and be restored to a right relationship with you and one another. Lord, we pray for the Church on this day when we celebrate our unity in Christ, but also confess and repent from our divisions, our tendency to put up walls, separate ourselves from other congregations, denominations, and other church groups. Humble us, Lord. Help us to think of the interests and needs of others, rather than always our own. Let us regard others as better than ourselves. Send your Spirit to refresh and renew us, changing our hearts and minds so that we might live in obedience to Christ, so that we might all be one. In his name we pray. Amen.