

ZIONSVILLE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

REV. JIM CAPPS- MARCH 10, 2013

“THE SUFFERING SERVANT- OUR EXAMPLE- PART ONE”

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-4

Writer and National Public Radio commentator Heather King, a recovering alcoholic who has come to a faith in Christ, reflected on her initial experience with the church:

“My first impulse was to think, My God, I don’t want to get sober (or in the case of the church, worship) with THESE nutcases! (or boring people, or people with different politics, taste in music, food books, or whatever). Nothing shatters our egos like worshipping with people we did not hand-pick.... The humiliation of discovering that we are thrown in with extremely unpromising people!—people who are broken, misguided, wishy-washy, out for themselves. People who are ... us.

But we don’t come to church to be with people who are like us in the way we want them to be. We come because we have staked our souls on the fact that Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and the church is the best place, the only place, to be while we all struggle to figure out what that means. We come because we’d be hard pressed to say which is the bigger of the two scandals: that he loves us—or that he loves everyone else.”

Isn’t it amazing the way in which God calls very different people from different situations in life to become a part of the Body of Christ the Church? As the Body of Christ, we must follow the example of Christ, the Suffering Servant, who by His life, death, and resurrection sets the standard for us.

Just as the different parts of our bodies must be united in their functions to bring us health, so the Body of Christ is meant to be united. In His prayer the night before He died Jesus prays for His disciple’s and our unity. Listen to the last part of His prayer in John 17:20-23:

“My prayer is not for them alone (His disciples). I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message (that’s us), 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, 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.”

Did you get the idea of what Jesus was praying? If we are to follow His example, we are to have the same kind of unity that is present in His relationship with God the Father. It will be our unity which draws the outside world to Jesus.

Did you know that there are icons in the Russian Orthodox Church which depict the Father, Son and Holy Spirit holding hands and facing inward toward each other? Their relationship has been described by the Greek word, *perichoresis*, which means a “circle dance.”

The Apostle Paul understood well the importance of unity when in Romans, I Corinthians and Ephesians he described the church as the Body of Christ. Likewise, as he writes his wonderfully positive Letter to the Church in Philippi, he underscores how crucial it is for them to be united, following the example of Jesus, the One who came as the Suffering Servant. There has been some kind of a conflict between two women, Euodia and Syntyche, threatening the unity of this great church.

Paul must have felt helpless as he wrote this correspondence from a prison cell. So as he writes 2:1-4, He lifts up Jesus, the Suffering Servant, as the example of unity. Read: Philippians 2:1-4.

IN VERSE 1, JESUS, THE SUFFERING SERVANT, IS THE MOTIVATION FOR OUR UNITY.

Some scholars would say that is on the basis of Paul's relationship with the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that Paul is making his plea for unity. Biblical scholar Gordon Fee suggests:

"Verse 1 offers the basis of the appeal (for unity), which has to do (apparently) with their own Trinitarian experience of God: Christ's comfort (encouragement), God's love and their common sharing in the Spirit."

Did any of you catch that idea of the Trinity when we read: "if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit." ?

There is also the undeniable sense in which Jesus, as He walked here on the dust of this earth, freely exhibited encouragement, comfort from love, fellowship with the Spirit, and tenderness and compassion. In each of these strongly relational actions, Jesus is setting the standard of what they should be like. Each of them is very important for promoting unity in the Body of Christ.

It's Jesus' example that should motivate the Church at Philippi as well as the Zionsville Presbyterian Church to be united so that we can be a witness to the watching world.

- There should be a sense of encouragement as we live life together as the Body of Christ in this place. Anytime you are here or sharing life in any way with another person of the ZPC Family, you should be giving each other courage to live life wherever it takes us.

It's a shame, that far too often, that hasn't taken place here and in many churches in our world. In fact, often, I fear that we go away discouraged. We come together with expectations of joyfully meeting and serving God and we leave disappointed.

- There should be a deep comfort which comes from knowing that we are loved by God and others. Far too often, because we are a fractured body, we experience pain and discomfort.
- There should be a unifying fellowship of the Holy Spirit knitting us together in wondrous ways, even though we may be an unlikely, diverse group as Heather King suggested at the beginning. Far too often, we feel more disconnected and alone after we have shared time with others from the Body of Christ.
- Our moments together should reek with tenderness and compassion if we are authentically following Christ's example. Instead, we feel more hurt and broken than when we came together.

Sisters and Brothers, the Evil One has a “Hay Day” when he plants seeds of disunity in our midst! Jesus, the Suffering Servant, who gave His life for us, provides a motivation for unity.

IN VERSE 2, JESUS, THE SUFFERING SERVANT, SETS THE EXAMPLE FOR OUR UNITY.

This verse is dripping with emotion and meaning, as the imprisoned apostle hundreds of miles away in Rome pleads with the Philippians, “then make my joy complete.” Or, “If you want to make me really happy as I sit here biding my time in jail...” Then Paul passionately shares three actions he would like them to take, all of them centered on unity in their Community of Faith.

- “Being like-minded” - doesn’t mean that we all have the same opinions, preferences, or concerns. What it does mean is that we have a strong desire to be united in the truth and our eyes are focused primarily on Jesus. It means not majoring in the minor, which can take our eyes off Jesus. These are the same words spoken to Euodia and Syntyche in 4:2. Usually, it’s not the major things that separate us. It’s the minor things.
We will flesh out this concept more next week when we look at verses 5-11. That passage is set up by “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus,” or, “Have the same mind in you as was in Christ Jesus.”
- “Having the Same love” - They should have the same love which God had for them in sending Christ to our world. It’s the idea of *agape*, which means giving ourselves as completely as we know how without expecting some kind of remuneration or reward. It’s the first fruit of the Spirit from which all of the other fruit grow. If we are all filled with the Spirit, then by God’s grace, we should have the same love.
Nothing erodes this kind of love more than internal friction and “infighting.” Conversely, nothing breaks down backbiting and melts internal strife more than the warm passionate love of God which drew us to God in the first place.
- “Being one in spirit and purpose” – Paul is saying that the Philippians should be united as they move in the same direction seeking to fulfill the same goals. That spirit and purpose always be wrapped in being like the Suffering Servant and seeking with every ounce of energy within them to bring honor and glory to Him. There must be a singular focus which transcends everything else.

For us as a church, this is so important during this season of transition. We must be united in a laser-like focus in “Making Disciples and Releasing Disciples into a Broken world” through Vision 2020.

One of the great thinkers of the 20th Century was Abraham Maslow who brought about a huge shift in the field of psychology with his theory of “self-actualization.” To summarize his findings, Maslow wrote, “Without exception, I found that every person who was sincerely happy, radiantly alive, was living for a purpose or cause beyond himself.”

Dear friends, that’s what we have when we are one in spirit and purpose, seeking with every ounce of energy we possess to follow Jesus’ example and glorify Him.

IN VERSES 3-4, PAUL SHARES THREE OF THE MOST COMMON OBSTACLES TO UNITY.

He writes to his beloved Philippians, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility, consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interest of others."

- The first obstacle is "selfish ambition." Here Paul is talking about not so much advancing the work for the betterment of the body, but for their own personal gains. It's that inner drive to achieve success to gain personal recognition and prestige rather than see the Body accomplish its desired purpose. Paul, as we realize today, knew how subtle that ambition could be. It only takes one or two people who possess this kind of personal ambition to divert the focus from following the example of Jesus so as to glorify God to lifting up an individual or individuals.

I must admit to you that this has been an obstacle that I have struggled with through the years. As a competitive person who loves athletics, I have been guilty of selfish ambition, wanting to be the pastor of a large prestigious church. When that happened I was more focused on filling the pews and filling the plate, attendance and finances, than I was on following the example of Jesus and glorifying God. While rationalizations were plentiful, if the truth be known the unity of the people I served suffered. Through the years, "ambition" is a word found often in my confessions.

- The second obstacle of a united body is "vain conceit." Scottish Biblical scholar, William Barclay says of this obstacle:

"There is a desire for *personal prestige*, the desire for empty glory. It is in many ways true to say that prestige is for many people an even greater temptation than wealth. To be admired, to be respected, to have a platform seat, to have one's opinion sought....are for many people the most desirable things."

Paul knew that this kind of "vain conceit" or desire for "personal prestige" was a subtle way the Evil One would use to fracture the Body of Christ. Sometimes, when we don't get the recognition we long for at work or the community or even in our families, we seek it at church.

- The third obstacle is "self-interest." - "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but to the interest of others." While we don't know exactly what particular person or problem in the Church of Philippi Paul may be thinking about, we do know that human nature caused people then as well as now to "look out for #1." Unity is impossible if our focus is getting only what we want and not what's best for the body. We aren't "one in spirit and purpose" when we are seeking our own ways.

It's interesting and quite revealing to realize that these three obstacles, selfish ambition, vain conceit, and self-interest are 180 degrees different or direct opposites of the kind of example Jesus sets as the Suffering Servant. Next week, as we look at Philippians 2:5-11, Paul will be giving us perhaps the most succinct and vivid description of who Jesus was and what he came to do of any passage in the whole Bible.

APPLICATION

In 1988, I went to a conference at the University Presbyterian Church of Seattle called the "Pieces of the Dream." It was there that I made a significant discovery in self-awareness as the Senior Pastor, Bruce Larson, confessed that he was a "relational theologian." I resonated with the idea that "it's all about relationships," first with God and then with the people in our world.

With that said, you can imagine how I felt when in one of our first staff meetings, Don Paterson spoke what is his passionate mantra: "It's all about relationships." I immediately felt that I must be in the right place for this season in my life.

This week, I read about a Harvard study that began in 1937 which searched for the factors which contribute to human well-being and happiness. They started with 268 male Harvard students who seemed to be healthy and well-adjusted. For 42 of the 72 years of that study, a psychiatrist named George Valliant directed the project. In 2008, when he was asked what he has learned from this amazing research project, he said that his secret to happiness was: "The only thing that really matters in life are your relationships to other people."

Sounds familiar, doesn't it. I believe the great First Century scholar and writer, Paul of Tarsus, would say a similar thing. If we, as the Body of Christ, are going to impact the world around us, we must be united. "It's all about relationships." While we come from different backgrounds and have different preferences and opinions on many issues, we must be united in following the example of the Suffering servant Jesus Christ. With our eyes focused on Jesus, we must be "like-minded, having the same love, and being one in spirit and purpose." We must not allow ourselves be filled with "selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility considered others better than ourselves." We must but aside self-interested and be wrapped up in the interests of others."

This week as most of you know, the Session of ZPC, realizing that we are a different church than we were 5 years ago, looking toward how we need to be staffed for the future. They started with the leadership team where there are now 4 of us and said that we really only need 2 people. Realizing that the new senior pastor would fill one of those positions, we needed to reduce our numbers by 3. This reduction wasn't based upon performance, but on the Session's prayerful projection of what we needed for the future. While very, very difficult decisions to make, the Session was "like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose." There was a wonderful unity even as they looked at different scenarios and shared differences of opinions.

In the next month, the Session will then look at the remainder of the staff with the same eye on what we need for the future. During this time of transition, it is so important that we are united following the example of the Suffering Servant, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Listen to this mystery from God's created order which I believe speaks to us about unity in the church:
Read about the Fire Ants

Dear friends, I believe God is calling us, in the most positive of ways, to start all over again. Like that new church which was founded a little over 30 years ago we need to be about building a caring community where every person is loved and valued. We need to be a place where people grow deeper in the relationship with God through study and worship, especially in small groups. We must be a people who lose themselves in hands on service to a broken world, caring for all kinds of people with all kinds of needs on behalf of our Lord Jesus.

With numbers in worship, in giving and in staff, more than ever it is important for us to pull together in common unity. As I have said before, most church plants would feel unbelievably blessed with all that we have. God has given us more than enough to accomplish His purpose for us. The variable is not God and His faithfulness. The variable is us. Are we willing to lay aside our understandings of the past; lay aside our personal agendas and goals and allow the Holy Spirit to knit us together in perfect unity?