

Striving toward Harmony – Philippians 2:1-13 – October 1, 2017

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Today we continue our discussion of Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. In this passage Paul focuses on harmony or unity within the Philippian congregation. What are the things that make for a harmonious church? How can unique individuals work together in an atmosphere of coherence and unanimity? How can different people come together within the body of Christ and move forward?

Just as a reminder to us, the Philippian church was founded by the Apostle Paul. Philippi was a colony of the Roman Empire. Paul wrote letters to various churches to continue his ministry with them. At the time he wrote this letter, he was prisoner of Rome awaiting his fate. He was aware that the Philippian church was facing struggle and persecution

In this passage, Paul begins by reminding them they are already in Christ – they are part of Christ's body and should take encouragement from that. Whatever they do, they don't do on their own. The Spirit of God is with them to nourish and sustain them. They have already received God's love and compassion through Jesus Christ. This is their solid foundation, as followers of Christ.

Now that they are in Christ, Paul wants them to grow in maturity of faith. Don't stop here. Move forward. Build on the foundation that you already have. He gives four exhortations about what to do next. First, be of the same mind. This doesn't mean they must agree on everything or come to a consensus on every little detail. Being of the same mind has to do with the sharing of a common attitude, or having a similar mindset. Second, he tells them to have the same love. This refers to the agape love, unconditional love for others. If you recall, this type of love is not a warm and fuzzy feeling but instead it is a call to action. If we have love for someone, we seek their greater good.

Third he exhorts the church to be in full accord, or in other words, live in harmony with one another. Paul calls them to live joined-together, celebrating their mutuality. As members of one body, they are no longer unique individuals, but necessary parts of a greater whole. What a great image for World Communion Sunday! And the goal is to work together as one unit. And finally, Paul instructs the congregation to be of one mind. Now, if you were paying close attention, you know that he already said that. That was his first instruction, and he repeats it as his final. Obviously, Paul thinks that this is pretty important, this idea of sharing a common attitude, having the same mindset.

While we don't know what it is, there was some kind of discord in the Philippian church. Any time you put a group of different people together, eventually conflict will arise. Whether it's feuding between members or families or disagreements over doctrine or the color of the carpet, conflict in the church is inevitable. From within one congregation, to an entire denomination, all the way to the universal church, you can't avoid conflict.

So when that happens, Paul teaches them to have the same unconditional love, to live harmoniously as a community, and twice he says to be of the same mind. Paul then gives some examples of the type of things that lead to conflict - selfishness, conceit, or self-interest. Paul knows that once you start putting your wants and needs ahead of everyone else's, that can lead to trouble. And that's why he stresses being of the same mind. If you're striving toward harmony within the group, you have less tendency to focus inward.

Then, to further explain what he means by being of the same mind, Paul inserts a hymn in this letter. He introduces it by saying, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

It's a beautiful hymn, and is well worth repeating here:

"though he was in the form of God, (he) did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, 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, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Paul uses the hymn help the Philippians move beyond their discord. He wants them to have the same mind as Jesus. The hymn describes Jesus as one who emptied himself completely. He became a human being, lived a life of service and obedience to God, and willingly accepted death. Christ put aside his glory, humbling himself into human form. He chose to serve others. And he lived in obedience to God. This is the mind of Christ. Humility, service, obedience. This is the mindset that Paul espouses for the church. As you relate to one another, think this way. Humility, service, obedience. Let this be the common attitude of the group. Humility, service, obedience. Be of the same mind, and let that mindset be the mind of Jesus Christ.

Now that is easier said than done. Our sinful natures often tell us to put self first, hence Paul's warning against selfishness. Having this type of mindset does not come naturally for us. And so Paul instructs the congregation in this way – work out your salvation in fear and

trembling. That's a formal way of saying, just do it. Put the mind of Christ within your own head and work at it. Humility, service, and obedience can be contrary to how we want to act. But Paul says, work it out. And for many of us, it will take some very hard work. Practice makes perfect. Practice humility, practice service, practice obedience.

Fortunately for us, we don't have to try to do this on our own. This passage concludes with the assertion from Paul that we don't work alone. It is God who is at work within us, giving us both the will and strength to accomplish the task. The desire in us and the ability to do it both come from God.

It is this mindset that takes us away from our desires to be self-serving and individualistic. It is this mindset that helps us to live in harmony with one other, despite our differences. It is this mindset that pushes us into loving others and putting the needs of others before our own. As we live our lives with this mindset of Christ guiding and directing us – humility, service, obedience – then the harmony we seek within the community of faith will come.