

Faith Mennonite Church
May 13, 2018 – Seventh Sunday of Easter
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Make my joy complete
Philippians 2:1-13

The passage from Philippians 2, which includes the “Christ hymn,” thought to be an early Christian hymn, is both fitting and also daunting as a final preaching text. Fitting, because the whole book of Philippians is a love letter to a church that Paul founded. While I was not here at the founding of this congregation, I feel deeply blessed to have been one of the pastors who got to fall in love with all of you. Daunting, because it’s hard to improve or elaborate on words that the Apostle Paul carefully crafted in this letter.

Nevertheless, preaching is one of things you called me to do and, with God’s grace, I will do so to the end! I want to begin by giving credit to the Bible commentator William Barclay. While I have a good share of the volumes in the *Believers Church Bible Commentary Series*, my bookshelf does not contain the volume on Philippians. However, our church library still contains the classic series of commentaries by Barclay. William Barclay wrote in the mid-20th century; his volume on Philippians was first published in 1957—the first year of my life! Barclay was the commentator that my father depended on during his preaching years, so the mention of the name Barclay brings my father’s voice to mind.

All of the writings that we have from Paul resulted from problems in the churches that he had planted. (I guess we should give thanks for problems!) This shouldn’t surprise us, given that these churches were largely made up of people for whom Christian faith, based in the Abrahamic faith, was entirely new. Often they were a mix of Jewish Christians and persons who were formerly pagan. Paul didn’t stay for years at any one location, entrusting the leadership to persons in each new church.

Some of Paul’s letters clearly show frustration: in the letters to the church in Corinth, Paul addressed a variety of ethical and spiritual matters that distressed him, and in the letter to the Galatians, he was exasperated that they had fallen into legalism around certain Jewish practices. In contrast, to the Philippians, Paul writes lovingly, longingly. The problem here does not seem to be a theological or ethical matter, but rather one of simply getting along. A conflict had emerged between two women, Euodia and Syntyche. The fact that Paul addressed them by name suggests that they held leadership positions. When leaders come into conflict, it affects the whole body. Throughout this letter, Paul calls on the church to be “be of one mind”...“to have the same mind.” This wasn’t a call to strict conformity, but an insistence that our unity is based in our shared confession that “Jesus is Lord,” not in falling in line with credal formulations.

In the first four verses of chapter 2, Paul identifies the basis for unity and the causes of disunity. I like that he begins with the positive. Unity comes from “encouragement in Christ,” “consolation from love,” “sharing in the Spirit,” and from “compassion and sympathy.” These are attitudes, experiences—not an affirmation of articles in a confession of faith, although those certainly have their place in the church. By contrast, disunity emerges from “selfish ambition,” “conceit,” and regarding oneself as most important—self-centeredness. I wonder whether Euodia and Syntyche became competitive. Did one think she had a closer connection to Paul? Was one a stronger preacher or the other charismatic in a way that attracted people? We don’t know the details, but something diminished their regard for one another.

Here, then, Paul turns to the words of a hymn, or so it seems since the cadence and the form of writing changes. In this hymn, Jesus Christ is our model for relating to one another in the church. Jesus, being in the form (*morphe*—that which does not change) of God, doesn’t cling to or remain in that form but is willing to take the form (*schema*—that which does change) of humanity. This *kenosis*, emptying himself of his God-form, led him to the ultimate aspect of humanity, which is death, even execution. Rather than being crushed in death, this experience of suffering in and with humanity, results in Jesus’ exaltation. God

raises his name above every name so that, in this same love, everyone is drawn to bend the knee in adoration and to confess their allegiance to the *kyrios*, the Lord whom we revere as our master, the authority above *all* earthly authorities, the one we follow and to whom we pledge allegiance.

Therefore, a favorite word in Paul's writing; *because of this...just like this...* "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." Work out—give yourself over to the completion of the project that God has begun within and among you. "God is at work in you, enabling you"—energizing, giving you strength—"to will and to work for God's good pleasure." And what is that pleasure? Unity! Unity in the church brings God pleasure and it builds and binds God's people together.

In these days of deep division, both in the world and, sadly, in the church, I pray that this congregation will continue to base your work for peace, for justice, for healing in Christ, in this model of encouraging, loving, Spirit-guided, and compassionate love that God has given to us. And on this day when we are remembering and celebrating our mothers and those who have been like a mother to us, I want to give thanks for the way that my mother has been a model of these attitudes for me, and for her prayerful support through these years of my ministry.

In closing, I will read some of the other familiar passages from this letter, allowing Paul's words to be my closing words to you.

... live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel... (1:27)

Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. (2:14-16)

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (3:12-14)

[For] our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. (3:20-4:1)

Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (4:4-9)

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit (...be with our spirit). Amen. (4:23)