

Faith Mennonite Church
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“Whose feet do I need to wash?”
Philippians 2

The first 11 verses of Philippians are some of the most beautiful words in the Bible. In the NRSV, which I use as a study Bible, the chapter opens with the words

- Encouragement
- Consolation
- Sharing in the Spirit
- Compassion and sympathy

Think for a moment: how different might our lives be if we had these words posted at strategic places in our homes—on the bathroom mirror or above the kitchen sink—and if we were to begin each day with a commitment to offer and to look for:

- Encouragement
- Consolation
- Sharing in the Spirit
- Compassion and sympathy

If we are spending our time doing and offering these things Paul expects it will be a pretty small jump to his vision of unity: “Make my joy complete,” he says, by finding agreement in mind and spirit and sharing mutual love.

Paul’s deep desire for unity in the church is present throughout his writings. In several of his letters, he used the metaphor of a body to describe how diverse members function as one (1 Cor. 12:12; Romans 12:4; Eph 4:4, 16). To the Ephesians he wrote of Christ breaking down the dividing wall of hostility between peoples and creating peace and unity (Eph 2:12-14). The best demonstration of the presence of the Spirit of Christ in a body of believers, according to Paul, was unity. More than miracles and healing power. More than fine preaching or praying in tongues.

Why was unity so important for Paul? Because Paul understood unity to be the very nature of God. The Jesus event, God made flesh, was both a result of this unity and a demonstration of unity. For Paul, following Jesus’ example meant that we look out for the interest of others before ourselves. Following Jesus means that we check our competitive ambitions at the door, and notice and affirm the gifts in those around us.

This was such a compelling notion for Paul, or someone in one of the early Christian communities—perhaps someone in Philippi—that they created a song (vv. 6-11).

...have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶ Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God

something to be used to his own advantage;
7 rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
8 And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

These words hold an important theological premise about God. The hymn says that Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, or used to his advantage. Jesus did not give up his Godly nature by becoming human; rather *it was the very nature of God to be self-giving*. In taking on human form, by entering into the full human experience, Jesus acted out of the very nature of God.

Paul expected that this kenotic, or self-giving nature of God, would become second-nature for the children of God, the followers and imitators of Jesus. This nature would spell the end of dissensions, of murmuring, of quarreling. He went on, in the second half of the 2nd chapter (which we didn't read this morning) to describe two persons who offered such self-giving love and support to him. The first was Timothy, whom Paul had mentored in his youth. Timothy became a loyal companion, serving with Paul and attending his needs. Timothy didn't use Paul's imprisonment as an opportunity to launch out on his own solo career; rather he stayed to serve and encourage him. The other was Epaphroditus, a member of the Philippian church, who also attended Paul. As a relatively young church, we wouldn't expect the Philippian church to have an excess of members, yet they sent one of their own as a gift to Paul.

It's difficult for us, as modern readers, with the benefit of modern psychology, to read this chapter without raising the concern about self-giving that goes awry: caregivers who never take time for themselves or parents who sacrifice their personal lives for their children. Some of us may also feel uncomfortable with Paul's expectation that the Philippian church will "obey" him. Obedience is a word that doesn't have a lot of resonance in our individualistic and democratic culture. It raises fears of authoritarianism or more-subtle forms of abuse of power. And certainly we don't have to look far to find evidence of this in church history, or among some Christian groups today.

Of course it would be unfair to judge Paul by modern standards and understanding. But Paul actually seems to share this concern. Indeed, he wants to send Epaphroditus back to Philippi precisely because he knows they had worried about him when they heard he was ill. And he is concerned that Epaphroditus has worried that his absence has been hard on the church back home. On the other hand, Paul's general appeal in this chapter, offers a spot-on remedy for the

political discord in our country today, in which few of the people in national leadership seem to be able to look beyond their personal self-interest.

No, Paul is not calling for unhealthy, guilt- or responsibility-based behaviors. Neither is he calling for us to hide our emotions or anger at things we don't agree with. Paul often had sharp words for his critics, and on a number of occasions, jumped to his self-defense. What Paul is calling for is a spirituality that recognizes the nature of God, not as all-powerful and dominant, but as all-loving and generous. Just as Jesus' death on the cross led to Jesus' exultation, Paul believed that Jesus' followers would find the joy of unity as they—and we—become attentive to the needs of others, as we watch in admiration for their gifts to unfold, and as we listen, carefully listen, to the truth in one another.

Paul returned time and again to the theme of unity precisely because it seems to run counter to our human nature. In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul recalled how the primal human couple, Adam & Eve, newly formed in the image of God, quickly departed from that image and sought autonomy and advantage. Even this week, after I had read and reread this text various times, I found myself in a heated conversation with someone I genuinely regard. We were talking about something we both deeply care about, but see from different points of view. As we conversed I found myself frustrated; why couldn't I make myself understood? And likely the other person felt the same way. The next day, with time to reflect on that conversation and on this passage, I realized that being of "one accord" or the "same mind," may not mean being in full agreement but committing ourselves to continue to regard one another with compassion and consolation and to trust that we really do share in the same Spirit—a Spirit of immense variety and diversity.

This isn't rocket science. It's really quite basic. And it can become our nature if invite God to work in us, as Paul, wrote, "enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure" (v. 13). We do this work as we practice the disciplines of encouragement, consolation, sharing in the same Spirit, and compassion.

In 1974 Adrienne Rich won the National Book Award for poetry, beating out fellow nominees Audre Lorde and Alice Walker. When she gave her acceptance speech she said: "We, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Alice Walker, together accept this award in the name of all women whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world." The three women had written the statement together, following their nominations, and agreed that whoever won would read it. Rather than compete, they wished to support and enrich each other's work.¹

Once a year, on Maundy Thursday, we offer the opportunity for people to take part in the ritual of foot-washing. This was the action Jesus took, just before his death, to set an example of a posture of unity, the willingness to kneel before another. Who do you need to encourage? Who needs your consolation and compassion? Whose feet do you need to wash?

¹ Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin, "Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric," *Communication Monographs* 62 (1995): 13.