

The Joy of Being Church 3: *Joy in Humility*

By
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from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

October 1, 2023
World Communion Sunday

Psalm 131

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. ²But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. ³O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time on and forevermore.

Philippians 2:1-13

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing 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, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

¹²Therefore, 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 God's good pleasure.

One of the challenges of discerning *The Word of the Lord* from a letter is that we only have one half of the correspondence. Reading Paul's letters is like overhearing a phone conversation and not knowing exactly what the person on the far end is saying. Usually, it's easy enough to get the gist of it, but you still have to read between the lines.

For this 150th Anniversary season of Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, we are focusing on the Letter to the Philippians, because it is such an encouraging word for a Christian community as we make our way forward during challenging times. International alignments are fraught, with violence, hunger, natural disaster, and mass migrations of people on the move for survival; national politics are so polarized we are stuck in a spiral of chaotic turmoil; social and mental welfare is fragile; and the mainline church is in decline. We need Paul's uplifting words he uses to describe congregational life: *joy, fellowship, love, partnership, affection, and unity*.

Fling wide the doors of the church as people come in and these are the characteristics of the community we want people to encounter. Go into the world in peace, we say at the end of worship, and these are the qualities of the Christian life we want to take with us: *joy, fellowship, love, partnership, affection*, all of which, according to Paul, is descriptive of *unity*. But how on earth do we talk about *unity* at this moment in time? Much less, a unity that contains joy, love, and affection among a divided and polarized people.

Paul says his joy will be complete if the church can be unified: *be of the same mind*. Three times, in these few opening verses, he says it: *having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...* Listening in and hearing only one half of the conversation, reading between the lines, it is clear there is division and dis-unity among the Philippian congregation. We can infer this early, first century church faced opposition from outside the church, as well as division from within.

It helps to understand something about what was going on in Philippi, a city where the social fabric was rife with militant and partisan divisions. Founded about four hundred years before Paul wrote this letter, the city was a major Greek trading center at the edge of the Aegean Sea. Following the assassination of Julius Caesar, a hundred years earlier Caesar's heirs, Mark Anthony and Octavian, confronted the forces of his assassins at the Battle of Philippi just west of the city. They won the battle and released a number of their veteran soldiers to resettle and occupy the city as their reward. So, on Greek soil, they pledged allegiance to Rome, established a military culture, governed by foreign officials, and marked by huge monuments and theaters that displayed the wealth of nearby goldmines. Wealth, citizenship, and military lineage defined the social and political strata of this Imperial city.

When Paul planted a church there, he preached the same message he took everywhere: in Christ you are a new creation; Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between you; your divisions are dissolved for you are now citizens of heaven. As my preacher friend Patrick Johnson described it, "In this little church in this proud city, Paul was knitting a new kind of social fabric, different from the surrounding culture, with threads of service, mutual love and humility. But it was tenuous, vulnerable to the next explosion of road rage, or political rage, or church rage."¹

You may have noticed that Paul does not dismiss their diversity. He does not admonish their political factions. But he does say, if you are going to survive as a church, *be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...* Then, Paul reminds them of one of their own hymns which gives voice to the humility of Christ. Being a faithful congregation is not about getting a set of beliefs right. We need not think alike. It's a matter of getting our relationships right. It's to live in the world humbly as Christ lives, seeing the good, the worth, the beautiful in

¹ Patrick Johnson, "Joy Will Overflow," 10/23/22, First Presbyterian, Asheville.

others. As another has said, “Humility is never a virtue we obtain head-on. Humility is the by-product that results from considering those around us in an honorable fashion.”²

On this World Communion Sunday, this letter recalls a church being planted and nurtured in a time and place of extraordinary conflict, division and loudly competing political claims on one’s allegiance. It reminds us to be mindful of Christians around the world who practice their faith at great risk, who try to live the gospel amid great suffering, many of whom do so under a military occupation of their land, not unlike ancient Rome.

Paul’s summons to be of one mind in the humble pattern of Jesus Christ is not an invitation to assent passively to one’s suffering or to bask in low self-esteem. It is a call to be the Church in joy, following Jesus Christ in a way of life that participates in putting self-interest aside, in order to consider the interests of others, it is a call to regard others as worthy of God’s love, mercy, and grace. Our unity is not to be found in our sameness, but in the shared mind of Christ. Which means, at least in the church, we are not first and foremost American, but rather citizens of heaven. We are not first and foremost political partisans, or tribal enemies, because when we gather in this place, and at this table, we are a unified body shaping our common life into something that looks like Christ. And, when we leave here, we carry with us a posture of humility, compassion and love, signs of the power and presence of God to heal and transform the world.

Here’s a story that gives us a glimpse of what that might look like. Upon completing two years of service in West Africa as a Peace Corps volunteer, twenty-nine-year-old Dorothea Hertzberg reflected on why she went abroad to serve, but in all humility realized she was the one transformed. Dorothea was leaving the village where she had worked on what she describes as an “unforgivingly hot day.” Her departure required

² Tom Are, *Joy Even on Your Worst Days: Wisdom from Philippians*, p.58.

an eleven-mile bike ride to the nearest paved road. She set off on her Peace Corps-issued 21-speed mountain bike, dreaming of eating a piece of pizza in a distant village, when she hit a bump in the road. She landed with pedals spinning wildly but going nowhere. She had seven more miles to bike, only half a bottle of water and the 115-degree heat was beating down.

As she stood there in disbelief an old villager came riding up in the opposite direction asking in his native tongue, “What’s wrong with your bike?” She explained, he flashed a smile, and then he began to rearrange a strap that tied his bag to his bike rack. He had about three feet of thin but durable rubber strap which he proceeded to tie to her handlebars; he pointed to her seat and told her to hop on. At first thinking he was joking, Dorothea shook her head in refusal and disbelief, but then realized that he was serious. This old man was offering to tow her by bike seven miles in unbearable heat.

“It turned out to be one of the most hysterical yet touching moments of my life,” she remembers. “This poor man vigorously pedaling and dripping with sweat as he towed the American princess through the barren desert. Every villager we saw along the way shrieked in surprise and called out, “Good morning!” An hour later they arrived at their destination, He exhausted, she in complete awe of his generosity. She took a long look at his face and those kind eyes, telling herself never to forget it because this man was the heart and essence of his impoverished country, a place where you never feel abandoned because someone is always coming along to help, where a hungry woman would share her last bowl of food with a stranger, where family is everything and the guest is paramount.

She writes reflectively, “I volunteered for Peace Corps service to “give back” to the world. Today, I realize I gain much more in return. In one

of the poorest countries in the world ... I learned what giving truly means from the poor.”³

Paul would add, I think, she learned from the humility of one serving the self-interests of another. Friends, like the strap tied between those two bikes on that hot West African day we are tied to this encouragement from Paul’s Letter to one of his favorite congregations. From his prison cell, he is writing to us so that we might better understand what the joy of being church together really means.

Like the old villager who sweated and pulled the American peace worker who went there to help him, Paul is reminding us how Jesus’ turned things around, how Jesus reversed the order of things, and inverted commonly held assumptions, trying to pull us along into the citizenship of heaven on earth. Jesus said, the first will be last, and the last will be first; in a world of political chaos and fear and military might, he said the powerless little children hold the keys to the kingdom; he said, love one another just as I have loved you; he said, this is my body, broken for you, take, eat, and remember. He sacrificed and humbled himself, so that from bended knee we might look up and see how the mind of Christ unites us, how God is at work through us, and how, through humility, we will find joy, complete joy.

AMEN.

³ Dorothea Hertzberg, “A Lesson in Giving,” *The New York Times* online.