

Southport Presbyterian Church
Rev. Tim Thomas
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We Are One...
Philippians 2:5-11; 3:1-21; 4:1

As I begin today, I need to ask a few questions, if I may. How many of you are a member of a family? How many of you have brothers or sisters, or both? How many of you are the only child? Did any of you ever see your parents disagree? Did those of you who have brothers and sisters, ever disagree? I know my brothers and I did. In fact, while preparing for today's sermon, I was reminded of one particular disagreement my brothers and I were having when we were around 12 or 13 years old. Let me tell you about it.

Most of you know that I am a preacher's kid and that I have two brothers and everyone knows that preachers' kids are good little Christian children...YEAH, RIGHT. The truth is, as a kid, I considered my two younger brothers to be necessary evils. I had not asked for them, nor did I have any desire to be associated with them and, I am certain, my brothers felt the same way about me. The one thing my brothers and I could agree on was that we wanted our personal identities to be unique and exclusive of each other. We also wanted our identities to reflect our status and position within our immediate family. Each of us wanted to be the 'alpha male' (forgetting our father was the family's 'alpha'). Therefore, our juvenile testosterone-laden attitudes created tension and often caused a need for discipline from my parents. To the consternation of my parents, our power struggles often erupted into shouting matches or instantaneous world wrestling championships.

As you can tell, my parents had their hands full with their three strong-willed and rebellious sons. In order to keep my brothers and I reigned in, my parents constantly reinforced that we were a family, and being family meant we stood by each other through thick and thin. We were to love each other regardless of our differences. My brothers and I heard about family love and oneness, and its benefits, almost daily. Yet the three of us still found it necessary to defend our personal territory and status. However, modification of our attitudes was right around the corner.

This modification occurred during a prolonged world wrestling championship in which my brothers and I were the only participants. Our audience, my father, was becoming frustrated with our behavior, and finally decided it was time to stop the championship and move the participants to their neutral corners. To our surprise and bewilderment, my father approached us and, with a gentle yet authoritative voice, informed us it was time to stop pummeling each other. The softness of his voice caught us off guard and we immediately stopped our aggression. As my brothers and I stood there, my father declared, "You boys don't seem to get it. You are brothers and need to act like brothers. You guys are a part of a bigger picture. You are family. Your mom, you guys and I are one family. Always will be. You can't leave the family even if you try. You will always be linked to the family. Now, you guys need to ask yourselves a few questions. Do you really want to harm your brother? Do you care what happens to your brother? Do you love your brother?" The three of us stared down at the floor and pondered the questions. Slowly, each of us raised our heads and grudgingly answered the last question, "Yeah, sure I do." My father responded, "Don't you think it's time to show each other a little love?" Fearing repercussion if we answered negatively to his question, we answered in unison, "I guess so." Having our full attention and knowing our fear of corporal punishment, my father took full advantage of our

stillness and used the moment to teach us a valuable lesson about loving your brother, “I want you boys to kiss each other and tell him you love and care for him.”

Our faces revealed our disbelief and astonishment at our father’s emphatic proposal. In order to obey our father, my brothers and I would have to suffer the self-humiliation of expressing our love for each other in a way that repulsed each of us.

Seeing no way out of our dilemma, my brothers and I looked at each and wondered who was going to be the first to move. As we watched the other, we intuitively approached each other simultaneously. We kissed each other on the cheek and then immediately wiped our mouths. We followed with each of us quickly expressing our love and care for each other, then stood pawing the floor. My father, with an enormous all-knowing smile spread across his face, concluded the ritual by saying as he was leaving us in our disgrace, “Now, don’t you boys feel better?”

Alone and still stinging from our humiliation, my brothers and I slowly looked at each other and began to silently laugh. Our laughter grew and we found ourselves slapping each other on the back with brotherly fellowship and joking about what we had just experienced. In that moment of laughter, my brothers and I became one in the family. Even though we were each unique, our identities now came from being a member of the family. We had discovered that our diversity of opinions and uniqueness of ideology contributed to our family. We finally realized we would always be brothers even when we disagree. That fact has never changed.

My brothers and I still have disagreements. However, we can now agree to disagree without feeling threatened with exclusion. When my brothers and I get together, we often recant this embarrassing and humiliating story. We do so because we now feel the freedom to laugh at ourselves and enjoy being who we are within our family.

In a lot of ways, the dissension and in-fighting within my family caused by my brothers and I is very similar to another family of people—the church of Philippi. Just as my father, who was concerned with family dissension, stepped in and brought into focus the bigger and more important picture of being one in family, Paul, the concerned loving founding “father,” steps in and writes a letter to the church of Philippi, which was experiencing conflict and dissension. In his letter, Paul’s gently and lovingly brings the church’s focus to the one person who shapes and gives the church “ONENESS” in identity, meaning, purpose, and hope—Jesus Christ—and the church of Philippi needed to return their focus to Christ’s example demonstrated through his life, death and resurrection. If I were to capture the letter to the Philippians in a phrase it would be “We are one in Christ,” which Paul believed and lived.

Let’s listen to Paul’s letter and hear his understanding of who Christ is.

Scripture Text: Philippians 2:1-11, 3:1, 3:3-14

In chapter 2:1-8, Paul writes,

“If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2 make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interest, but to the interest of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a

slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, 8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.” NRS Phil. 2:1-8

Wow! That’s the mind of Christ. Is this what Paul is asking the church of Philippi to be? Is he asking them to not exploit their relationship with God, but empty themselves and become slaves to one another and to God? Moreover, as a slave of God, to humiliate themselves and be obedient to God by negating their self-centeredness, and to love God and their neighbors to the point of death for the sake of God and their neighbors. Paul is urging the church of Philippi to open itself to the fullness of what it means to follow Christ. Urging them to think and act as Christ. Urging them to be one minded with Christ. Urging the church to be “one in Christ.” Kind of a difficult request of a church that’s experiencing differences and disagreements, don’t you think? Isn’t oneness of a church in Christ worth having? Sure it is. It is the surpassing value. It is worth sharing in the oneness with Christ as a slave of God and neighbor. Listen to what Paul writes verses as the “surpassing value” given to Christ for his obedience to God the Father.

“9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” NRS Phil 2:9-11

Did we notice something here? God the Father exalts Jesus, who came as an obedient human slave of God. God the Father’s exaltation was and is the resurrection of Jesus, which revealed his divineness as the Son of God. We can share in God’s exaltation through our oneness in Christ, which is our eternal salvation. The Amazing Promise of God’s Amazing Grace and Mercy!!!

The Philippian's shared oneness in Christ is extremely important and personal to Paul. We find evidence of this in chapter 3. Here, Paul includes himself in the church of Philippi’s struggle to be one in Christ. With the words

“...my brothers and sisters...we share in the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh, even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh” NRS 3:1,3-4

Paul states clearly to this congregation what he understands the source of their dissension—confidence in the flesh—and he includes himself in their struggle with issues of the flesh. What could Paul possibly mean when he uses “confidence in the flesh?” Could it be Paul is writing about self-importance, self-righteousness, self-agendas and/or self-authority he wrote about in chapter 2? Is Paul saying to the church of Philippi, as well as himself, that personal status and position are obstacles to oneness in Christ? The answer may lie in Paul’s self-description of confidence in the flesh.

“If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” NRS Phil 3:4b-6

By any standard, these are impressive human accomplishments of the time and Paul certainly could have used them to scold the church and distance himself from the church. However, Paul doesn’t choose to do this. He chooses, instead, to point an accusing finger at himself. Why? Maybe, just maybe, Paul believes in something more valuable and more important than his past accomplishments and I believe it has to do with his Damascus Road experience. For, without this experience of encountering

the living Christ Jesus, Paul's entire value system would have remained as it was. Through his experience of the Living Lord Jesus Christ, Paul's previous life and accomplishments became unfulfilling and unimportant. As he wrote,

“7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. 12 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. 13 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, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” NRS Phil. 3:7-14

As Paul wrote, the goal of the church of Philippi was to empty themselves, take the form of a slave, become humbled and obedient to God to the point of death—death of the confidence in the flesh. To be, of the same mind as Christ—one in Christ—in order to gain the prize of the heavenly call of God.

Application:

Disagreements and dissention is not new to the Church. If we really think about it, over the course of history, one of the Church's major characteristics has been public dissension and disagreement. In fact, one could possibly argue that the most relevant Christian tradition is disagreement among Christians. Since its beginning, the Christian Church has had differences over certain theological or doctrinal issues, power, control, influence and other human agendas. An early example was in the fourth century. Various churches located around the Mediterranean Sea could not come to agreement on the important question of who Jesus is. Yet, they gathered, with the urging of the Emperor of the Roman Empire, in Nicea and hashed it out. The Nicene Creed is a result of them hashing it out. However, some, who attended the council of Nicea, believed their position was more important and theologically sound. They left the larger church and formed churches that reflected their understanding, similar to what happened during the Protestant Reformation or with the many splits of the Presbyterian Church over the course of its history. The church has always had issues that have caused division, mistrust and confrontation.

Even in today's Christian community of churches, we find a continuation of the tradition of division and disharmony. When we listen to people who do not attend a church or of other faiths, we hear them pointing out our hypocrisy of not being united as one of their reasons for not attending a Christian church. They also have no problem telling us about how church members are judgmental, intolerant, disloyal and lack empathy for others. They don't hear or see church unity, oneness or love. In some ways, we would have to agree with them. Often, when we open our newspaper or magazine, watch TV or get on the Internet, we find news story or article reporting our intolerances and divisions. Those who do not attend church or are of different faiths see, or hear the same reports and have their view of Christianity affirmed—a view of the Church's confidence in the flesh.

Every day, I struggle as Paul did with self-centeredness, when, in Romans, he talks of struggling with doing the things he knew he shouldn't do and not doing the things he should. I have to admit to myself my struggle with my own confidence in the flesh. I have to acknowledge pushing my church

agenda in meetings or small groups. I have to acknowledge judging other's proposals as unnecessary or unworthy. I have to acknowledge boasting of my self-righteousness. I have to acknowledge being resentful and holding grudges. I also have to acknowledge that I have a big problem with people who disagree with me and that I often just shut them out and pretend they don't exist. If you don't believe me, just ask my small group or friends. They will tell you I do all of these self-centered things. Most of all, I have to acknowledge, with a heavy heart, being of the same mind in Christ is often the farthest thing from my mind. Some pastor I am.

However, there is hope for us. I thank God everyday for the fact, that even though we sin, we are forgiven through our confession our sins. I am also thankful to God for loving us even though we often don't love others. I am thankful to God for Paul's letter to the Philippians pointing out the ever-present source of division in the church—not having the same mind of Christ.

Our Challenge:

Somewhere in my little mind, I keep hearing the two great commands of God in Paul's letter to the Philippians. We know what they are. We have heard them today, first in our invitation to worship and once again with our reading from the Gospel. Let's hear them one more time.

"'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40"

I believe these two great commands are foundational for the church to have oneness with the same mind in Christ, because they are the actions of Christ. Paul understood this about Christ and Christ's life. If we really look at these two commands, they are about our relationship with God and others. Each one reflects the other in these ways. If we love with all that we are, we will love our neighbors and enemies as ourselves. If we love our neighbors and enemies as ourselves, we will show others our love of God. This is having the same mind in Christ and being one in Christ.

Let's begin to reflect our love of God and love of neighbor doing as Paul encourages the church of Philippi to do. Let's

“be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interest, but to the interest of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, 8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. ” NRS Phil. 2:2-8