

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Mary Margaret Porter**  
**“Faith in or Faith of?”**  
**Psalm 34, Philippians 2; 1-17**  
**17th Sunday After Pentecost**  
**October 1, 2017**

Paul has high expectations of those who are followers of Christ. Nearly all his epistles have a “therefore” section – since you believe, “therefore” certain things follow.

To the Romans he said, *therefore* be transformed and not conformed to the world (see Romans 12:1-2).

To the Ephesians he said, *therefore* put away your former manner of life and be renewed (see Ephesians 4:22-24).

To the Colossians he said; *therefore* seek the things that are above (see Colossians 3:1).

There is a distinct manner of life, which essentially flows from the fact that you are in Christ!

In this letter from prison, he uses the same methodology again but focuses this time on “being of one mind” and not only one mind but the “same mind that was in Christ Jesus.” This is unity that is built on their identity in Christ, expressed through a selfless and unflinching focus on communicating God’s life-giving work through Jesus Christ to the world.

**Philippians 2:1-18**

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, <sup>2</sup> make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

<sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
<sup>7</sup> but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,  
<sup>8</sup> he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.

<sup>9</sup> Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
<sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
<sup>11</sup> and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, 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; <sup>13</sup> for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

<sup>14</sup> Do all things without murmuring and arguing, <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you— <sup>18</sup> and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.

As I was sitting to write this, my final sermon at DCPC, several things were running through my mind. I was reminded that this is World Communion Sunday - a celebration observed by several Christian denominations, taking place on the first Sunday of every October, that promotes Christian unity and ecumenical cooperation. It is centered on the table of Eucharist in which Christ told of his impending sacrifice of body and blood for our forgiveness, Christ's ultimate gift for us. Thus it is appropriate that World Communion Sunday is also a time when we receive the annual Peace and Global Witness Offering as a way of continuing the ancient Christian practice of sharing our gifts with brothers and sisters in need.

I was also considering the changes that are happening and will happen at this church in the coming months and years. My departure, and the gift of the remarkable Larry Lyon, a retired Presbyterian minister in our midst, who will step in to continue, and I am sure improve on, my ministry. Lib's upcoming retirement to sunny South Carolina - an interim pastor who will be coming in soon to keep things moving until a permanent pastor can be called - John Ryan's arrival this year and the many awesome things that are happening in faith formation with our children, youth and adults - Claire George-Drumheller becoming a full time campus minister to further our ties with this great campus, Davidson College - my alma mater.

But I was also fretting that this, my last sermon here, should be good - really good. I wanted to leave on a high note of course. We will get to humility in a minute -

But as I was pondering all of this, I was listening to NPR - WFAE in the background. And in between the pledge drive segments and promised gifts for giving any amount (anyone that listens to NPR will note that this past week was their annual membership campaign which makes listening through it a badge of true NPR fandom.) and listening with that the background I began to take note of what I was hearing - stories about the devastating damage all around Puerto Rico, the Caribbean, Florida, Texas and the gulf states after the past several hurricanes this season, stories of those in Mexico trying to recover from a destructive earthquake, our Congress arguing over how best to provide health care for our nation, and how to deal with the large issue of immigration in this country, investigations into Russian meddling in our elections, continuing racial tension in our nation and with the nation's police, threats of nuclear war from both North Korea and our own country - oh and something about the NFL in a feud with President Trump. It was all so depressing; I almost wished they would cut back to the fundraising - almost.

Listen to what Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians – “be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 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 interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

Sounds like we are right on track – right?

It is hard to imagine that any words of Paul could be more urgently needed in our world today considering the fractured state of our nation, the persistent quarrels over non-essentials, the threat of racial discord and violence and the increasing tendency toward isolation in this nation and nations around the world. Paul would have none of it!

And so in these opening verses of Chapter Two of his letter to the church in Philippi, which leads into the great hymn of the Christian Faith about the emptying of Christ, he tries to firmly tie together for the Philippians, and for us, our call single-mindedness in the gospel and in Christ.

His intent is not to tell us that we must have exactly the same opinion about everything. Nor does he intend to tell us we must be exact duplicates of each other. And he has clearly said in other epistles that we certainly will have different patterns of giftedness. But he insists, for the sake of Christ, that we all have a heart that is as selfless as was the mind of Christ himself. The great irony and beauty of the Christian faith is that the one Being in the universe who really is more exalted, more lofty, and more powerful than anyone, is the same Being who, far from using his lofty position as a platform for pride, actually stooped lower than low to humbly save us from *our* sinful pride.

And it is only by humbling ourselves that we too will be able to remain focused on the good news and work of the gospel – in humility we'll each consider others better than ourselves, selfish ambition and conceit will disappear, and we'll look eagerly to the interests of others rather than our own. In doing so, according to Paul, "We will be of the same mind that was in Jesus Christ."

Sounds easy enough right? We have bracelets to remind us. WWJD - what would Jesus do? - and all that.

But, no matter how well we live our lives, how much good we do in the world; we are always afflicted by sin. Paul grasps this best when in his letter to the Romans he writes, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil that I do not want is what I do." It is precisely at this point, when we do not do the good we want to or should do, but do the evil we do not want, that the Christian faith reveals itself. What we cannot, or do not do for ourselves or by ourselves, God offers us by God's grace. This very God was made man in Jesus Christ so that we may be transformed from the inside out. By Christ's own faith – his humble birth, death and resurrection, we are all made new creations. The scripture says that "everything old has passed away; see; everything has become new." Paul then is calling Christ's followers to participate in this new creation by adopting for oneself the attitudes and actions of Jesus Christ – to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.

Paul uses this idea of the significance of Christ's own faith and of our mirroring Christ in action and faith several times in his letters to the various churches. There is an ambiguous Greek phrase 'pistis christou' that is used by Paul seven times in his letters to the various churches. If you opened the Bibles in front of you passages such as Galatians 2:16, you would see that this Greek phrase is most often translated as to read that we are justified by "Faith in Jesus Christ." This is probably what we all grew up learning. We are saved because of our faith in Jesus Christ, our savior, who died for our sins. However some argue that the better translation of Paul's original message would replace "in" with an "of" – we are justified by the "Faith of Jesus Christ"

This is the question — is Christ the object of our faith such that, by our faith in him, we receive salvation? Or are we saved by Christ's OWN faith. Think for a moment how this slight change in translation from FAITH IN to FAITH OF can transform your understanding of Christian faith. That change in translation moves us from ones *own* belief in the saving power of Christ's death & resurrection to the saving power of GOD as exhibited by Jesus' own faithfulness TO GOD in enduring a human life and death for our salvation.

In many ways this second understanding, that it is and was Christ's own faith rather than our own faith in Christ, that is more in line with the overall Pauline mission and ministry and better speaks to our obligations as a Christian community when Paul calls us to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.

You see, our own faith is not the precondition for receiving God's gracious act of salvation. Our faith is simply the response to a grace already given in the faithful life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore, in faith, we do not respond of our own accord, but by grace and in participation with Christ – being of the same mind of Christ.

And being of the same mind of Christ is to humble ourselves, to become less not more. It is being modest in everything and risking all for the sake of others. Pride is forever driving us to amass as much power for ourselves as we can and then flaunting it so that we can glimpse envy, awe and maybe even fear in others. But Paul warns against this balance of power. He argues that God does not inspire reverence by touting God's power or omnipotence. Rather God inspires our love by willingly setting aside God's power.

Humility may well be the core Christian virtue around which most all other virtues cluster. Humility helps us acknowledge the fact that we all need each other. And when that is our basic attitude toward other people, we should be naturally inclined to lend them a hand in service or love. Because, you see, humility connects us to others - even as pride isolates us. For Paul, our appropriate response to God's gift of faith as exemplified by Jesus Christ is not one of pride and power. Rather Jesus' faith provides us a model of response to grace that is humble and self-giving, that risks much and becomes vulnerable to suffering.

The well-known theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer himself as an example of this humble participation in the faithful suffering and trials of Christ. Bonhoeffer was a 20<sup>th</sup> century German theologian who aided in the resistance to Hitler in WWII. In April 1943, the German police arrested Bonhoeffer and his last months were spent in a series of prisons and finally a concentration camp where, before he was hanged, Bonhoeffer served as pastor and theologian for his fellow prisoners, even befriending many of his guards such that they saved his writings. Bonhoeffer knew the mind of Christ better than most I can think of. He once wrote, ““Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). Just as Christ bears our burdens, so also are we to bear the burdens of our brothers and sisters. Discipleship is commitment to the suffering Christ.”

In his life Bonhoeffer was attempting to live out the call to us in Paul's letter to the church in Philippi – adopting for himself the attitudes and actions of Jesus Christ, humility, love, joy and suffering. He was of the same mind as Christ Jesus.

Our SAGES group had a wonderful gathering for lunch on Thursday where Tony Marciano, who is head of the Charlotte Rescue Mission, spoke. The Charlotte Rescue Mission is a faith-based in-house substance abuse treatment ministry. Tony spoke about how many of their guests live their entire lives of addiction feeling that they are not worthy of love – their family's love, society's love, even God's love. He told about how seemingly simple acts of humility and love can make a large impact on these individual's lives. Simply by sitting down with someone as an equal, without judgment, and asking about their story or even their day indicates to those struggling to regain a sense of worth, that they are indeed valued, seen, and loved. This is what Christ did over and over. Sat with the outcast, called to the marginalized, ate with the sinner. These simple and humble acts of compassion changed our world forever and stand as an example for which we are to follow every day.

You see true Christian faith then is not an individual 'faith in' reality, but a communal 'faith of' reality. As with Christ, it involves participation in a community of people who risk their own security by being for others whose histories, backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, economic or political situation may be entirely different from their own. Realizing that each of us bears the responsibility not simply of a faith in Jesus Christ but the participation in the faith of Jesus Christ draws us into a strange fellowship where previously significant divisions no longer matter. Paul calls this "faith working through love." It is only by practicing this love for one another that we are able to begin to understand God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

Theresa of Avila wrote

Christ has no body now but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks with compassion on this world.  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.<sup>1</sup>

So where have we, and are we, being challenged in our daily lives to "be of the same mind as Christ," - to humble ourselves in service to others, to think of others interests before our own, to be Christ's Hands and feet on earth? As I mentioned, we are encountering increasing division in our world, we are living in a world of unease with no part immune from acts of terror, we are living in a world filled with poverty and violence, with broken dreams, lost hopes. We are living at a time when the earth itself seems to be groaning with storms, earthquakes and fires.

Yet I have seen glimpses of hope. I have listened to stories of strangers who got in their own boats to cruise the flooded streets of Houston to pick up neighbors they had never met who were stranded in their homes. I have read of Muslim groups gathering supplies and providing much needed assistance to those in need in Texas regardless of religion. I have seen police body cameras capture impromptu community dance parties with police rather than racial violence. I have heard of local ham radio operators spending hours on end in their homes taking messages from Puerto Ricans trapped without communications to let their families in the states know they are ok and what their needs are.

And I have seen it here firsthand, at DCPC, in the few years I have been here. I have been transformed by the acts of love and kindness you show to one another, to those here and around the world, and have shown to me.

I have walked with some of you at work as you wrestle with what it means to live the life of Christ in a secular world, I have witnessed adults and youth leave their comfortable homes, friends and families and go to Kenya or Nicaragua and share their faith with those very different from themselves by their acts of kindness. I have watched as this church stepped out in faith to create a new relationship with Blythe Elementary that has grown into a thriving ministry. I have watched our Stephen Ministers walk with their brothers and sisters through difficult times and provide a warm hand and listening ear. I have experienced older adults reflecting on their lives and wondering how else they may serve even if they are not able to serve in the same ways as before. I have sat with families mourning the loss of a loved one or grieving a diagnosis but in faith, trusting God to provide a way - a hope. I have participated as we wrestled together to bring our different points of view to a discussion, and while we might not change our opinions we go away with love and respect for one another.

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<sup>1</sup>[https://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Teresa\\_Of\\_Avila\\_Christ\\_Has\\_No\\_Body.shtml](https://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Teresa_Of_Avila_Christ_Has_No_Body.shtml)

Friends, this is what being of one mind in Christ looks like. It is becoming less so others can become more, it is serving others before serving yourself, it is to welcome the outsider and consider him or her as your brother or sister, it is to suffer loss, to give up the comfortable, to humble yourself before God and neighbor.

So today, on this World Communion Sunday, imagine not sitting next to those to your left and your right here in this place, but sitting next to those from Kenya, Nicaragua, Blythe Elementary or The Charlotte Rescue Mission. Imagine sitting at a bedside of someone in the hospital or hospice or in the ruined home of a hurricane or earthquake victim – imagine sitting by someone who may look completely different from you, may smell different, may dress different, may even be of a different faith. Now imagine yourself not just sitting beside them at the table, but leaning down to wash their feet before the meal, to ask about their lives and their needs and make sure they are met, to pull resources from your own body or out of your own pocket to ensure they have the necessities.

Brothers and sisters, we don't have to imagine this scenario, it is the table that is set before us each and every day. The easy way is to simply have faith IN Christ and hope that is enough, the more difficult path is to step forward in faith and humility, knowing that by God's grace we are saved by the faith OF Christ and can aspire to that same faith in our every interaction with our brothers and sisters. Christ has shown us the way. Christ, in his very life and death has shown us what to do. It may not be easy, but it will be worth it.