



**Mennonite
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Formation

Sermon

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Church Life 101

Having just heard our text for this morning -- the final chapter of St. Paul's letter to the young church of Philippi -- let us rush to avoid some possible first impressions! Paul's weighty theological teachings would seem to be behind us. So now it is time to close his letter with a cordial, polite but slightly haphazard list of afterthoughts and greetings, right?. Be nice to each other and get along. Be happy, rejoice and think positive thoughts. Oh and thanks for your taxdeductible contribution to our ministry. Miss you! Bye now.

No, quite the opposite. If we've been listening to the biblical text and paying attention to the sermons on Philippians over the course of the last month we may be noticing keywords and themes that Paul has been weaving together since the opening verses of chapter one. Joy, rejoice. You've shared in the work of the gospel. I pray that God will show you what is excellent or best. Now share in one mind, the mind of Christ. When so many themes converge, they invite us to look deeper. And just in case we've missed the connections, our chapter begins with a tip-off, the word "therefore," soon followed by "in this way."

For if anything, this chapter is what Paul has been building toward throughout the entire letter. He is in prison. They are a young vibrant church at a time when all Christian congregations are learning what it means to be church. Here, my beloved whom I long for, and may never see again... Here, I only have so much time, ink and paper left... Oh my, what should I say?... Okay, here are the basics. If you forget everything else, remember this.

From our distance, we may not sense Paul's urgency, and we certainly lack most of the

details about the relationships and exact circumstances that led to the letter. What we are left with nonetheless is what I am calling "Church Life 101" -- introductory but key essentials for any Christian community, congregation, parish, monestary or church, if it is to live well together and participate in God's larger purposes in the world.

So to preview the course, here's where we're going: Lesson 1: Don't just stand there, stand together in the Lord. Lesson 2: Don't avoid conflict, but learn how to be together in your conflict. Lesson 3: Don't work out your problems, work from out of God's abundance. Lesson 4: Don't go it alone, for you are part of the larger Church Lesson 5: Greetings! -- they're never just greetings, after all. Okay? Let us begin:

Lesson 1: Don't just stand there, stand together in the Lord. The first verse of Philippians 4 serves as a transition from the earlier chapters, and an introduction to the remainder of the letter - - but again, it is hardly just a literary device. "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."

What preachers like to call the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of Christianity are compacted together into this one verse -- the absolute necessity of a relationship with God, made possible through Jesus Christ, and loving bonds of relationship between human beings, beginning for a Christian in the Christian community itself. Because really, if this is not what church life is about, we are wasting our time or kidding ourselves or both. To those who would come to church for therapy or entertainment or

even for fellowship alone, Paul would say something like this:

Fine, welcome, we're glad you're here. Just about all of us started in the Christian life precisely when we recognized our neediness. But now that you're here, let me explain where "here" is. The ground we are standing on as Christians is Jesus Christ. And stay tuned, because in a minute I'm going to have to talk about conflict, so you'll need to stand firm. As Christians learn how to live together, we quickly learn that love isn't just sentimentality. If our life together is going to be real it has to be honest, which sometimes requires hard work. And that's just inside the church!

The Christian way isn't always popular after all; over the centuries we've learned not to be surprised by either subtle or overt persecution, even when we're engaged with the world and working for the common good. So if you only want therapy, there are professional therapists out there. If you only want entertainment, there are flashier venues. If you only want a social life, let me tell you about my favorite bar. But if you really do like this place, the church, well, Jesus Christ is finally the only reason we're here. Still, if you want to stand firm in him, take heart, we're in this together.

Lesson 2: Don't avoid conflict, but learn how to be together in your conflict. Suddenly, Church Life 101 gets real practical: "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel." Practical -- but it sure would be nice to know a few more details. Biblical scholars really don't know what the conflict between these two women was about. Their names appear nowhere else. The identity of the "loyal companion" Paul is asking to mediate is also uncertain. And so, with nothing to go on besides a general exhortation, it may be all the harder to dislodge our first impression upon hearing this paragraph -- that everything will be okay if these Philippian women simply practice "Mediterranean Nice."

Fortunately, Paul has told us more than "Just be nice" or "Can't we all just get along?" If we back up one chapter we remember that Paul himself could be blunt, confrontational, almost rhetorically brutal, when the core truths of the gospel were at stake or when human pride threatened to limit the work of the Holy Spirit.

But wait, we're not finished with our review yet. Paul isn't just saying to fight it out either. Yes,

he uses athletic metaphors throughout this letter, but the struggle he knows so well is a cooperative more than a competitive struggle. When we hear him telling Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind, we're supposed to take our review back one more chapter, and hear an echo from Philippians 2:5 -- "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

"Mind" here does not so much mean thoughts as character. Yes, it is important to clearly express that mind through careful thoughts and right doctrine, as Paul strove to do even in a pastoral letter like Philippians. But the goal is never simply abstract or theoretical. Take that teaching in chapter 2 about the Incarnation -- though equal with God, Christ took on the lowliest of human form, in costly humility, leading to the cross.

The purpose of careful theological teaching is to be so clear as to be evocative, and so evocative as to change our lives, and so life-changing that we live every part of our lives in more and more Christ-like ways.

Paul does not insist that either Euodia or Syntyche change the other's mind, therefore, or even that they compromise. Paul beckons both of them toward the mind of Christ. And if they need help from the larger community or its leaders to reconcile, that cooperation itself will reflect the character of Christ.

As many of you know, for more than a decade I have been giving some of my best energies to that form of conflict resolution known as ecumenical dialogue -- in my case, between Mennonites and Roman Catholics. What one learns very quickly if one engages in serious ecumenical dialogue is that two very different poisons can be toxic for the conversation. One poison is to be so confident our side is right that we can only resolve our deep historical conflicts when the other side converts, repents or otherwise concedes. The other poison however is to try to paper over our differences or otherwise wish them away.

So what's left?

Many people involved in ecumenical dialogue -- Protestant as well as Catholic -- have found great help in the words of two different Catholic cardinals. The goal of ecumenical dialogue, they have insisted, is not that we move closer to one another, but that together we move closer to Christ. Whether the conflict is a long historical one between Mennonites and Catholics, or an interpersonal one between Euodia and Syntyche, or an intercongregational one between our congregation and another, or an intimate one

between Gerald and Joetta, these are wise words. This is the mind of Christ.

Lesson 3: Don't work out your problems, work from out of God's abundance. I summarize the next lesson this way in order to immediately head off the easiest and most misleading first impression of all. When Paul says "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice" he isn't just telling us to cheer up, exercise the power of positive thinking, or practice some kind of new-age "visualization." The brother is in prison, people! This can't be cheap, saccharine, easy advice. If anything, he is carrying over the realism of our previous lesson while reinforcing it with a wider theological perspective.

To explain, let me draw upon two other classes you might want to take, if you haven't already -- Conflict Resolution 101 and Organizational Leadership 101. Probably the best-selling introduction to conflict resolution ever is a book called Getting to Yes. One of the first things one learns there is to "Separate the People from the Problem." One idea for meditators is to literally change the layout of the room, so that instead of confronting each other across the negotiating table, the two sides in a conflict instead face a blackboard or whiteboard or newsprint that represents the problem that they share. Good advice.

But sometimes our culture's very focus on problem-solving is itself a problem. The more an individual or community or organization drills down into their problems, after all, the more they may reinforce those very problems. Of course we need to be honest. As I have just said, papering over differences, conflicts and problems can be toxic. But if it can sometimes be a good idea to move the chairs around the room to face a problem squarely yet together, it might also be an even better idea to move to another room entirely, or go outdoors.

In Organizational Leadership 101, therefore, we encounter an approach to strategic planning called "Appreciative Inquiry." Instead of starting by identifying problems and then trying to solve them -- only to risk obsessing over organizational deficits at best, or putting people on the defensive and inviting blame games at worst -- leaders or consultants ask "Where are we our best? How can we do better? What are the hidden resources that will allow us to do so?" It is a secular way of asking, "Where is the grace? What do we have to be thankful for? How is God at work among us?" As we return to Church Life 101, in other words, it is a way of saying, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice!"

So Paul may be in prison; he may know hunger. And the deeper we go into the Christian life the more we may become aware of the forces of oppression and empire that bear down upon the weak of the earth, thwarting God's Reign. But look around! There are believers even in the emperor's household, it turns out, a few more verses later. So even as we struggle -- whether working through church conflicts or confronting social problems and injustice -- there is abundance and good and excellence to build upon.

Think on these things! (I preach this first to myself, as a perpetually recovering curmudgeon trained to analyze and criticize and worry about the self-deceptions of our modern age.) There is joy to be found! There is good and beauty. So notice. Pay attention. "Think on these things."

Lesson 4: Don't go it alone! By itself, no congregation is the Church. Focussing only on itself, no congregation can even be healthy. The church of Philippi knows this. Here we do have more of the back story, thanks not only to ample details in this letter, but also the book of Acts. Not wanting to detract from the gospel or come across as a mercenary religious leader who is actually in it for the money, Paul has refused financial aid from other young Christian communities, even ones he had founded. But something about his bond with the Philippians is different. They have been especially generous, he has accepted their contributions to his ministry in other locales, and now he is writing back to thank them.

Indeed, this seems to be what prompted him to write his letter in the first place. What the Philippians know but that dysfunctional congregations often forget is that God has called them to something so much bigger than themselves. They are part of the worldwide people named Church. And the Church itself is being called together not for its own sake, but as witness and servant of the Kingdom of God. Of course we have to attend to our local needs and problems. Paul has just told the congregation and its leaders to help Euodia and Syntyche find reconciliation, after all. But this is the even bigger reason why the way to do that is not just to keep hammering away at each other or drilling down into our own problems. For if we wait to partner with other Christians in our conference or around the world until we've dealt with all our own personal and congregational issues, we'll never get there. One more problem will always come along. And focussing on ourselves will probably create more problems besides.

So finally, lesson 5: Greetings! Greetings from us, says Paul. Now greet one another! Greet every saint, every fellow believer, in Christ Jesus. Yes, this too is an essential part of Church Life 101. This too is more than a polite nicety. For among God's people, greetings are never just greetings, after all. They are a simple but essential sacrament of gratitude for the work of God in one another. They are the most basic way recognizing "whatever is good and excellent and worthy of praise." They are the living out of joy.

Indeed, whenever we greet one another and "pass the peace," even one-on-one, we have begun the work of peacebuilding in the world. For this is the most basic act of peace and justice -- to recognize others as made in God's image, redeemed by Christ's blood, and ever wooed by the Holy Spirit.

"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."
Amen!