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Philippians 2:1-13

When I served in Toronto, I developed a wonderful friendship with a new immigrant to Canada named Shue. I first met Shue when we undertook a program called “Coffee and Conversation”, where we invited new immigrants to come and practice their English. It was not an ESL class but a time for fellowship and gentle correction of conversational English. Our participants were almost predominantly from mainland China, as Shue was.

We hit it off right away, as she discovered we were born the same year and the same month. She took to calling me her brother. I still occasionally receive a phone call from her as she keeps tabs on me. I am not sure who learned more in Coffee and Conversation, our new friends, or myself. One thing became very clear in the very first few times we met.

We forget how difficult English is as a language to learn, especially for those who speak Mandarin. English idioms were particularly difficult for them. Things like “cat got your tongue”. We met for several years as a group, and many advanced very well in their efforts. Shue confided to me one day that the most useful thing for her learning English, was not necessarily our efforts at Coffee and Conversation, but from watching English television. In particular she found watching the show “Friends” most helpful.

This is probably true because the scripts were in conversational English with idioms and slang, and not formal English. I never have watch one episode of Friends. It really never appealed to me, so when I heard the lyrics of its theme song recently, I was quite surprised by the pessimism of the words. Many of you have heard the song, but have you ever listened to the words? They read, in part:

*So, no one told you life was gonna be this way  
Your job's a joke, you're broke, your love life's D.O.A.  
It's like you're always stuck in second gear  
When it hasn't been your day, your week, your month, or even your year.*  
I actually may have found a theme song for this current year 2020.

You know, some of us can relate to that first verse a little more than others. We all have bad days, but for some of us, those bad days have stretched into: bad weeks, months, or even years. We find ourselves talking like Eeyore, and saying things like, “whatever can go wrong will go wrong.” We have a pessimistic, browbeaten, downcast view of life. We suddenly find that we can't sleep, we've lost (or gained) weight, some days we just don't want to try anymore.

One of the things I have noticed about the Apostle Paul, and the other disciples, and especially about Jesus: is that they all had very bad days, weeks, and in Paul's case months. We like to view Paul's missionary effort as successful, and it was; but it came at a very steep price. Our text today points to the bitter and the sweet, that followed Paul through his missionary journeys.

Of all the churches Paul had a hand in starting, Philippi seems to have been his favorite. It was where he made his first foray into Europe. According to Luke; Paul was staying in Troas when he had a vision. Luke writes, “There was a man of Macedonia standing, begging him, and

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saying, ‘Come over into Macedonia and help us.’ ...immediately we sought to go out to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the Good News to them.”

(Acts 16:9-10)

Their time in Philippi got off to a great start. On the Sabbath, he and his cohort, Silas, went looking for a place of prayer. The Jewish religious law provided that should ten Jewish families live in a town or city, then they were required to create a synagogue. There were obviously not ten Jewish families in Philippi, so the law required worship then to take place near a body of water. An open-air service of a sort.

So, Paul and Silas headed down to the local river bank to pray. When they arrived, they found a group of women gathered for worship on the banks of a nearby river. The women invited Paul to speak, and he told them all about Jesus, and that he was the promised Messiah of the Jewish faith. As he spoke, a woman named Lydia opened her heart to the Lord. She accepted Jesus as the Christ and asked to be baptized ... and not only her, but her whole household.

Then she invited Paul and his company to stay in her home as long as they were in Philippi. It became his base of operation and, I suspect, the eventual home of the Philippian congregation. As a footnote: If you ever doubt the importance of women in Paul’s life and the development of the early church, think of Lydia. She’s one of many women responsible for his success. Well it seems that their missionary work got off to a great start.

It wasn’t long though, before Paul ran into trouble. Long story, short, he and Silas, were accused of sedition and thrown into jail. As you might expect, it only gave God an opportunity to show his glory. Many of you know what happened. Around midnight, there came an earthquake. The prison doors broke open. Paul and Silas were set free. But instead of running for their lives, they sat tight. When the jailer found them, he realized he owed them his life. Clearly, he was dealing with a power greater than anything he’d ever known.

He cried out, “What must I do to be saved?” Paul told him to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and he did. Then he invited Paul and Silas to his home where he and his whole household were baptized. They got out of prison, but they didn’t stay long. The first seeds of faith were firmly planted in Philippi. They said their goodbyes and promised to come back. In the meantime, Paul would stay in touch by letter, and that brings us to the text for today. It begins,

“If therefore there is any exhortation in Christ,  
if any consolation of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit,  
if any tender mercies and compassion, make my joy full,  
by being like-minded, having the same love,  
being of one accord, of one mind ...

(Philippians 2:1-2)

Truth be told, the Philippians had a problem. To paraphrase a line from The Music Man: “Oh, you’ve got trouble ... and that begins with T, and that rhymes with D, and that stands for

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division.” They were divided along any number of lines. They all had one thing in common: self-interest. One wanted this, another wanted that, and another wanted something altogether different.

Paul knew they’d never reach their potential to be the Body of Christ until they overcame their division. And so, at the heart of his letter, he appeals to them to be of one mind. But how? He suggests starting by building on their strengths. Paul knows there’s some measure of exhortation in Christ among them, some consolation of love, some fellowship of the Spirit, some tender mercies and compassion. Start with what you have and build on your strengths.

It’s said that within the best of saints, there’s a vestige of sin, and within the vilest of sinners there’s a twinge of virtue. The same holds true for groups and organizations, and that includes the church. The reality is: some congregations are more loving than others; some are more mission-minded; some are better at planning community-wide events; some are better at intercessory prayer. Bottom line: Some have greater strengths than others; yet, every congregation has strengths to build on.

What are our strengths? One, for sure, is the way we respond to a crisis within the congregation. When there’s a tragedy, or death, or life-threatening illness, you’re quick to circle the wagons and offer help and strength and support. I am a living example of that. Build on your strengths. But don’t let human nature get in the way. Paul hastens to add:

“... (do) nothing through rivalry or through conceit,  
but in humility, each counting others better than himself;  
each of you not just looking to his own things,  
but each of you also to the things of others.”  
(Philippians 2:3-4)

Listen: You’ll never fulfill your mission to be the Body of Christ in the world today until you lay aside your competitive spirit and self-interest. Yet, even that’s not enough. Paul knows that, even the best Christians with the best intentions will become divided and at odds with each other, if left to their own good will. And so, he asks them not only to be of one mind, but to look for a power greater than themselves. He writes,

“Have this in your mind, which was also in Christ Jesus,  
who, existing in the form of God,  
didn’t consider equality with God a thing to be grasped,  
but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant,  
being made in the likeness of men.”  
(Philippians 2:5-7)

What is it about the mind of Christ that sets Jesus so far above the rest of us and brings us together as one? First, there’s self-denial. Jesus didn’t strive to be on par with God. Instead, he subjected his divine power and wisdom to God’s authority and God’s will for his life.

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Sound familiar? Remember Adam and Eve and how they ate the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because they wanted to be like God. They wanted to decide for themselves what's right and wrong. They wanted to be their own gods. As a result, they severed their relationship with God and died a spiritual death. Jesus asked his disciples,

“For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world,  
and forfeit his life?...  
For whoever wants to save his life will lose it;  
and whoever will lose his life for my sake  
and the sake of the Good News will save it.”  
(Mark 8:35-36)

Jesus lived a life of self-denial. What he did, he did for others. What he said, he said for the benefit of others. Where he went, he went to help others. And when it came to the end, he didn't fight back and try to save his own life. Rather, he subjected himself to the cruelest form of persecution and suffering and death in order to redeem us from sin.

To share the mind of Christ is to let go of your self-interest and put others first. It's to seek what's best for all concerned in every situation. It's to lose yourself in pursuit of God's kingdom and so, experience the fullness of God's peace, joy and love. I read a story about an American Pastor who wrote about this unique approach to seeing oneself. He wrote:

*I have a friend who used to introduce himself by saying, “I'm nobody.” We attended a big church gathering years ago in Nashville, Tennessee. A well-known evangelist was working the crowd and came up to us with a big smile and said, “Greetings, men, I'm Dr. So, and So.” My friend shook his hand and said, “Nice to meet you. I'm nobody.” The other man looked flummoxed and didn't know what to say.*

*Well, I can tell you, my friend was anything but a nobody. The point he was making was this: There's a big difference between self-respect and self-importance. The more you draw attention to yourself, the more others focus their attention on you, and the less they're able to see the presence of Christ in you. (Phillip McLarty)*

And isn't it ironic? Jesus was anything but a celebrated figure in his day. His birth was known only to a few. His ministry lasted three years at best and was mostly exclusively confined to the area of Galilee. He died between two thieves. In the eyes of the world, he was a nobody. Well, I can tell you Jesus was more than a nobody. He was the only begotten Son of God. Yet, God used him, without acclaim, to reconcile the world to himself. Little wonder Paul will go on to say that,

“... at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
of those in heaven, those on earth, and those under the earth,  
and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.”  
(Philippians 2:10-11)

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Jesus lived a life of surrender and self-denial. He emptied himself. He also humbled himself and bore the burdens of others. He said, “For the Son of Man also came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)

In one of the most beautiful passages I know, Jesus put a towel around his neck and took a basin of water and, one by one, he knelt before his disciples and washed their feet. Then he told them,

“If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, have washed your feet,  
you also ought to wash one another’s feet.  
For I have given you an example,  
that you also should do as I have done to you.”  
(John 13:14-15)

And when they got into a big argument about who was the greatest, he said,

“... he who is greatest among you will be your servant.  
Whoever exalts himself will be humbled,  
and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”  
(Matthew 23:11-12)

Jesus’ life was a portrait of humility. It was also a model of obedience. His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane was his daily mantra: “Not my will, but yours be done.” (Luke 22:42) Friends, that’s the mind of Christ. And that’s how Jesus would have us live our lives, not only at the end, but in each and every moment of each and every day: “Not my will, but Thine be done.”

If we’d all lived by this simple rule-of-thumb, we’d never again experience division. As importantly, as others see the unity and common purpose we share as disciples of Jesus Christ, they’ll be that much more inclined to be part of our family of faith. Paul ends this passage with a solemn charge:

“... not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence,  
work out your own salvation with fear and trembling ...”  
(Philippians 2:12)

Stand on your own two feet, in other words. Don’t rest on the laurels of your forebears. Work together, looking to God for strength and hope and common purpose. Trust God to lead the way. After all, you’re hardly starting from scratch.

- You have God’s written Word translated into your own language. Read it. Study it. Let it inspire you and empower you to speak and act as children of God.
- You have the strength of community, not only those who are mature in the faith, but children whose spontaneity is always insightful and refreshing.

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- You have the legacy of a Godly heritage. You stand on the shoulders of those who've gone before you and left behind this lovely sanctuary and a faithful witness of service to the community and beyond.

Work out your own salvation by sharing the mind of Christ and walking in his footsteps, day by day. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** O God, you are the path maker of the universe. Your way is straight, and your way is narrow. Your way is the way of the just, the road that begins at the home of compassion and arrives at the threshold of mercy. You did not learn right and wrong sitting on a parent's knee or listening to a teacher or memorizing commandments. You are what is good; you ever have been good, and forever shall be good.

So why, O God, do we insist on being your accusers. We question your presence and distrust your love. We believe our ways to be just, our methods surer, our feelings deeper. Our anger finds fault with you for finding fault with us. But, O Author of Life, your word of grace is spoken so simply. "Turn," writes the prophet, "and live!" "Repent," cries Christ Jesus, "For the kingdom of God is at hand!" As it has always been, your word sets before each one of us a choice between life and empty existence.

At first glance, it appears to be an easy choice. But the abundance you promise is not the worldly abundance of which we so often dream. It is not displayed in property or piety. Rather, your abundance is unearthed in the richness of paradox. It is an abundance found by persons who find their lives by losing them. It is an abundance found by those who gain their freedom by being captives. It is an abundance found by those who become right-side-up in your sight by living upside down in the view of the world. It is an abundance found by those who see the greatness of God revealed in the death of someone executed like a criminal.

O God, you ask us to choose between life and existence. Contrary to appearances, the choice is not easy for us, for the life you offer is unlike any we have ever seen-except on a cross. You do, indeed, offer a life rich in paradox. It is a life demanding faith. Yet we often have only a kernel of faith when we stand in need of a giant redwood. We are not strong; redeem our weakness. We are not wise; transform our folly. We are not courageous; convert our cowardice.

Transfigure us, O Lord, for our personalities are split between yearnings for heaven and longings for earth. Give us daily glimpses of your abundant life that we might daily risk stepping out of our mere existence into the unknown. We would turn and live, if we could. With you, O God, we can.