

November 15, 2020 – St. Andrew's (Sarnia)

Philippians 2:1-13

Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, ² make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. ³ Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility consider one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴ do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶ Who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷ rather, he made himself nothing

by taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to death—

even death on a cross!

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place

and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

¹² Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

This is the Word of the Lord | Thanks be to God

Message: Hard Work

Do you remember the WWJD bracelet movement? It became a thing about thirty years ago now, starting as a Christian youth movement and snow-balling from there! For those who managed to miss out on it, these simple cloth bracelets, embroidered with the initials “WWJD” were meant to be worn by Christians as a way to remind themselves that, whatever they encountered through their day, they should act in way that personifies Jesus...doing, “what Jesus would do” in every situation and moment. The idea behind was good:

it was meant to keep our discipleship,

our following of Jesus,

front-and-centre in our minds every day.

WWJD has kind of left the spotlight,

although you can still buy “classic” bracelets in colourful multipacks.

Although that movement lost steam,

there is a lot of value in a visible, even a wearable, reminder
 of our relationship with Jesus
 and in quietly declaring that relationship
 to everyone who sees us.
 But there's something very special about asking ourselves that question
 – what would Jesus do? –
 as we go about our day.
 Because we're not really asking ourselves – we're asking him.

Whether the inventor of those WWJD bracelets knew it or not, though,
 that question, phrased exactly that way, is an old one.
 It was first used in the 1890s by a Baptist preacher
 named Charles Spurgeon, as a repeated refrain in a sermon.
 But Charles Spurgeon was himself quoting someone else,
 referencing a book written in the 1400s by Thomas á Kempis.
 The book was called *Imitatio Christi*,
 which means, “the imitation of Christ.”

But the push to let our decisions be guided by that question
 – what would Jesus do –
 is even older than Thomas á Kempis,
 because we find it written about in many of Paul's letters, too,
 including this week's scripture text
 about having the mind of Christ.

The Christian church at Philippi,
 by the time Paul wrote them this letter, was an “old” church,
 having been established some fifteen years prior,
 among the first of Paul's European church-plants.
 Paul regarded the members of this church
 with great love and affection.
 The conflict and trouble that inspired many of Paul's letters to other churches,
 like those in Corinth or Galatia,
 seemed to be less of a problem in Philippi.
 Instead, Paul writes to spiritually-mature Christians,
 with the goal of encouraging them
 to keep making progress, to keep growing,
 in their faith, over the long haul
 of years and decades;
 after the first flush of success
 and excitement
 had passed.
 He was writing this letter from a Roman prison;
 and so, in a way, Paul's words carry

so much more meaning
 because he was not writing from a position
 of freedom and power,
 but from a position of struggle and imprisonment.
 Paul's faith was a problem in the world he was living in;
 preaching the Gospel was what put him in prison in the first place.
 Having the mind of Christ, imitating Christ,
 was not something that had led to
 a life of safety and comfort for Paul,
 nor was it necessarily something that would be
 easy to do in his present situation.

So as we reflect on a little of what Paul wrote to the church at Philippi,
 hold in the back of your mind the certainty
 that when Paul talks about imitating Christ,
 as eloquent and moving and simple as his words are...
 ...he is not saying that it's going to be easy.
 Because Paul knows first-hand
 that imitating Christ
 is going to be really hard...
 ...that answering that question – what would Jesus do –
 from a Roman prison in the 60's AD
 or from North America in the 2020's...
 ...answering that question is not easy,
 and living that answer is hard work.

Paul says at the beginning of what we read today:
 "if there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love,
 if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion,
 make my joy complete by being of the same mind,
 maintaining the same love, united in spirit,
 intent on one purpose."
 It's important to note that Paul is not expressing doubt about these Christians.
 All his "if-ing" is meant to make them
 pause and examine themselves and their church-community
 to see if those qualities are, in fact, there, in their lives.
 Are they encouraged by Christ?
 Are they consoled by his love,
 do they find fellowship with one another in the Spirit?
 Do they love and empathise with one another
 as sisters and brothers in Christ?
 That's good, but don't stop there, says Paul.
 Make my joy complete
 by being of the same mind.

Being of the same mind does not mean
to think exactly the same as one another;
Paul is not demanding unimaginative, unthinking uniformity
or sameness from the Philippians, nor from us.
The Greek word Paul uses asks instead for unity of mind:
to agree together,
to value the same things,
and to be harmonious.

I know it's been a while since we've sung together,
but you may recall that singing in harmony
doesn't mean we all sing the same note
or sound exactly the same;
and yet when we do sing, we sing as one sound,
one song, each one of us making use of our voice
to add richness and depth.
It's that sort of "sameness of mind" that Paul is talking about,
where each Christian uses their diverse gifts and unique witness
to reveal God together to others.
And in the same way singing well and beautifully in harmony
requires hard work and long practice,
so does being of the same mind
as a church together.

Paul explains how it's done:
"Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit,
but with humility consider one another
as more important than yourselves;
do not merely look out for your own personal interests,
but also for the interests of others."

Like the Christians in Philippi,
these are words that we need to take
personally and seriously
as we seek to live the way that Christ lived,
as we seek to share the Gospel,
and be light and salt for a world that is hurting.
And they are challenging words.

"Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit..."
In other words, make sure you aren't selfishly taking from others
or thinking yourself more valuable or better than another.
Examine your motives and the outcome of your actions,

and err on the side of taking less
and giving more...
...because we are meant
to humbly consider others
as more important
than ourselves.

And that's a challenge for us,
to see ourselves and the world we live in
from a completely different perspective,
the perspective of the other person.
Humility is neither valued nor encouraged much
these days, and yet it's that very attitude
that Paul – and Jesus –
want us to embody.

It's my experience that the most humbling thing that can happen to a Christian
is to see ourselves clearly,
and then to see equally clearly
how different we are from the person God is calling us to be,
and how different we are from the person we would be,
if we truly sought to imitate Christ in our lives.

Humility makes us see our own human imperfections;
to hear where we are singing out-of-tune;
it causes us to think about ourselves
and the ways we get it wrong or fall short
of who God created us to be.

And yet, when we do this
– when we, with humility, consider one another
as more important than [ourselves] –
we begin to imitate Christ
in the most fundamental of ways.

Paul explains a little more what he means
when he says we must consider others more:
do not merely look out for your own personal interests, Paul writes,
but also for the interests of others.
Note that this is not an either/or thing
– we are meant to help others
without harming ourselves.

We can make sure people have what they need
 and are valued the way they should be
 without it taking away from our basic needs
 or somehow experiencing less
 of Christ's abundant life ourselves.
 It's not either/or;
 it's all-of-us-together, as the body of Christ,
 taking care of one another
 because this is
 what Jesus would
 – and did – do.

So, we are meant to be of the same mind,
 to emphasise putting others first,
 to not do things out of selfishness
 or act humble out of prideful conceit,
 to have the same concern for the interests of others
 as we do for our own.

And in doing so,
 we will discover true humility and a true picture
 of who we really are
 and who God wants us to be.

All of this, Paul writes, is what having the mind of Christ together means for us.

And then Paul sings a beautiful hymn
 about how this harmonious, unity of mind and purpose
 was revealed to us and modelled for us by Jesus.
 In the hymn, there is a constant back-and-forth of high and low notes:
 Christ did not use his equality with God for his own gain,
 but rather acted as a servant,
 entering into our broken world.
 But neither did he become less than himself
 – divine and human –
 because he was able to save us...
 ...by humbling himself even further,
 his death on the Cross
 the ultimate counter-point
 to his divine majesty.
 And then, in the end,
 Jesus is lifted up, exalted,

and honoured by all creation.

We know, of course, that we are not meant to replace Christ
or become copies of him;

Paul is not advising that, nor would Jesus.

We are called to imitate Christ,
to ask always what would Jesus do...
...and then do it.

To live our lives in ways that sing together
the Good News and abundant life
that Jesus proclaimed.

Our world does not really make it easy for us to imitate Christ;
but that's the very reason why it's so necessary,
why we absolutely must imitate Christ,
as best we can,
through the patient, daily practice
of humble love and service.

Having the mind of Christ – imitating him – is not all about others, though.
Paul was especially writing to this established church in Philippi
to teach them how to keep growing in their faith,
to become spiritually-mature Christians.

I mentioned that the “what would Jesus do” wristband-question
actually had deeper and older roots
than the youth movement of the nineties.

Thomas á Kempis, the 15th century author of *Imitatio Christi*,
wrote that if we truly want to be free of “all blindness of heart,”
then we must follow Jesus’ teachings,
in which we will find “hidden manna”
to feed and nurture ourselves.

But despite hearing the gospel of Jesus many, many times,
some people remain unaffected and unchanged by it,
and so á Kempis concluded that
“if you want to understand Christ’s words...
...you must strive to conform your entire life to his.”

So I have a challenge for each one of us this week:
to do the same self-reflecting that Paul asked the Philippians to do,
to ask frequently this week

– what would Jesus do –
and to make the commitment to imitate Christ.
That's the personal challenge
of this Scripture reading for the week.

But there's also a church-sized challenge...
...because we can't sing harmony on our own!
Consider how we, all together,
and I'm including our online and TV congregation too,
how we as a church are of the same mind
as one another and as Jesus,
and how we imitate Christ together
in our community.
Because that is the very heart of Christian witness
and it's how we make progress on spiritual journeys.
Imitating Christ
– shaping our lives around his –
that is how we grow our faith
and grow *up* into spiritual maturity as Christians,
it's how we let God work in us and through us for others,
and it's how we keep sharing
the good news of Jesus
with our hurting world.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.