

Channels of God's Love

Philippians 2:1-13 *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself....*

Let us hear Paul's words in his Letter to the Philippians as they relate to one of the spiritual disciplines in "Our Covenant One with Another." It is the one that calls us to *endeavor in every relationship to be a channel of God's love and forgiveness*. What a great challenge! God's love and forgiveness in EVERY relationship. This is the essence of what it means to live as followers of Christ, and it is very difficult. However, I think that Paul's words can help us.

Paul begins by saying "if" there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the spirit, any compassion and sympathy. Paul doesn't doubt that these realities are there. It has the meaning of "since" there are these things. It's like our saying to someone, "If you have any sense, you will not stand out in the field when there's lightning." We don't doubt that the good sense is there; we are appealing to the person to use the good sense we know is there. Just so, Paul is saying that since all of this is ours in Christ, therefore we are able to live in the way he calls us to live.

So, since we have this encouragement, since we have great consolation from God's love in Christ, since we share in the Spirit, and since there is compassion and sympathy because of Christ, therefore, says Paul, make my joy complete. Make my day! Make me really proud of you! Be of the same mind. Be in complete harmony with each other. Paul is saying that since we are in Christ, we have all the spiritual resources we need to live this way with one another. He doesn't mean agreeing on everything. He doesn't mean we have the same theological outlook or the same political convictions. We don't have to agree on issues. The harmony he is talking about is deeper than that. It is the harmony that exists when we cultivate awareness that we are brothers and sisters in God's love, in Christ. As a spiritual community, we each are to work at being mindful of that deeper unity at all times. We won't always sustain that awareness. Paul knows that. We know that. We have tensions and get mad and are often at our worst. But our hope lies in the fact that we are in Christ, that we already have everything we need to return to our best selves, to touch again and again that deeper harmony and unity.

One important way we touch this deeper unity is by LISTENING. When we truly listen to each other, not in order to argue or dispute, then we are touching that deeper unity. When we listen in this way, we move toward UNDERSTANDING each other, really understanding. Again, not in order to dispute or change each other, but to really know the other person. With true listening and understanding come love and a willingness to let other people be who they are. Listening toward understanding is a way that we practice this "same mind" and this harmony Paul says we have in Christ.

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves." We DO have selfish ambition and conceit. We

are all pretty insecure people who want things our way. Our conceit lies in the conviction that, of course, our way is best for everybody else. If we were truly secure in ourselves, content with who we are, all our faults and limitations included, then we would feel no need to impose ourselves on others, to control others or have them conform to how we think they should be.

The peace Christ gives us is this wonderful, complete self-acceptance that brings us a sense of deep security in life. As we touch that in ourselves, then we will be more at peace with others. I have everything I need. I am exactly what and who God made me to be. I don't need to have others conform to my will. I don't have to use other people and life itself to fulfill my ambitions. I can let go of the feeling that I have to be better or more successful than others. And when I am working with these things, I am surprised how at peace I feel with others. I'm no longer fighting battles with myself or others. I can say what I have to say, express the beliefs I have, speak about what I value, what I believe is most important. But I can do so out of a deep sense of peace in myself, knowing that all the forcefulness and verbal antagonism in the world will not add a thing to the truth of what I hold dear. It is not angry and antagonistic speech that makes possible a change in others or this world, but speech, and more importantly, a life that expresses its truth from a heart and mind at peace.

But what about this other thing: In humility regard others as better than yourselves? And this: let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others? Words such as this have led to unhealthy spirituality in Christianity. Self-hate. The wrong kind of self-denial that robs us of the joy God means us to have. A kind of selflessness that does things for others not because we really get a sense of fulfillment from it but because we don't want to feel guilty. That is resentful selflessness, and it doesn't communicate much of God's love. Paul is overstating things here. Regarding others as better than ourselves is the same kind of thing Jesus talked about--we are to be servants of others, the last will be first and the first last. It is a way of saying we are no more important than anyone else in the world, nor are we less important. It is a way of dealing with our tendencies to make ourselves feel better by seeing ourselves as somehow superior to others. Paul says considering others as better than ourselves gets us back toward the right frame of mind and spirit.

Stop being preoccupied with your own interests and seek the interests of others. He's not telling us to mind everybody else's business. He doesn't mean we are to smother people with our care and concern. There is not much worse than a Christian whose love really masks the desire to run everyone else's life. Another translation puts it this way: "Look to each other's interest and not merely to your own [New English Bible]." This is important. We are not to ignore our own very real needs. That would be a wrong understanding of self-denial. We do no one any good if we are ruining our own physical, mental, emotional or spiritual health. We are to take care of these lives God has given us. Those are our interests. But others have the same interests and needs. So we look beyond just our own needs to the needs of all. Or better to say, we see our own needs as interrelated to the needs of others. By keeping in mind the needs of all and not just my own, I am saved from being preoccupied with myself. But I am also saved from losing myself in the group, as it were, losing sight of my own unique gifts and what God calls me to do with my life. It is a matter of keeping a right balance.

Paul then says: Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. The same mind. The same awareness. The same outlook on life. We are to have the mind of Jesus, individually and together. Another translation puts it this way, which I like better: Have the same mind, which is yours in Christ Jesus [RSV]. Still another translation puts it this way: Let your bearing towards one another arise out of your life in Christ Jesus [New English Bible]. The point is that the mind, the attitude, the spirit we are to have is ALREADY OURS in Christ. It's not something alien to us. It's already in us. All we have to do is let it shape our lives and our relationships.

What is this mind of Christ? Paul now cites the words of an early Christian hymn or confession of faith. It speaks in poetic images of Christ who was equal to God giving up that special status and taking the form of a slave. Christ, instead of seeking his own status, moves into solidarity with human beings, shares our lives completely. And because of this kind of self-emptying, Jesus was elevated by God. We don't seek our own salvation in isolation from the salvation of all people, all creatures. If we are seeking our well being within the well being of everyone and everything, then we will be elevated by God, raised up to new life. That's the reason Christ is elevated and why others will recognize him as Lord. Not because they are brow-beaten by our religious zeal. Not because our religion is better than their religion. But because of the servant nature, the self-pouring-out nature of Jesus' life, compassionate solidarity [Prevallet] with us. That's how others might come to recognize Jesus' truth, the truth of his life and then take him as the lord of their lives, too.

Having the mind of Christ means having this self-pouring-out mind, this self-emptying mind. Here we get to the heart of Christian life, or we might say human life as embodied in Christ. Elaine Prevallet says repeatedly in her book which we are studying on Wednesday nights at the Festival Center that the order of the creation is that each creature lives only by sharing its life. Self-giving is the heart of life. We gain life by giving life. We become full by becoming empty. And here is where I want to get back to our discipline of endeavoring in every relationship to be a channel of God's love and forgiveness.

During the Covenant Members retreat two weeks ago, I was reflecting on that discipline when the word "channel" jumped out at me. I had been focusing more on "love" and "forgiveness," putting the emphasis on what I am supposed to be doing toward others. But I realized that the discipline puts the emphasis elsewhere. Showing God's love and forgiveness has to do with my being a CHANNEL. A channel has to be clear enough for something to run through it. And if I am to be a channel of God's love, I have to be empty enough, clear enough for that love and forgiveness to flow through me into the lives of others. So my work is not so much to focus on other people and how I feel or think about them, whether they have offended me or I have offended them, whether they are easy or difficult to love. It has to do with looking at myself and clearing out all that stuff that impedes the flow of God's love and forgiveness. Dealing with my hurts, which I love to nurse. Letting them go. Getting beyond them. Dealing with my prejudices, whatever they may be, that cast people into categories and groups so that I can write them off or take sides. Dealing with insecurities and fears that cause me to block off God's love flowing through me to persons I feel jealous toward or who are somehow a threat. It is the same thing as in Jesus' parable of

the Good Samaritan. The fellow asked Jesus, Who is my neighbor? He wanted some parameters, as we say, who he HAD TO love and who he didn't. At the end of the parable, Jesus asked him a different question: Who WAS neighbor to the person in need? That's different. It has to do with ME, not others. What needs to go on in me so that I have that "mind," that spirit that recognizes everyone, regardless of who they are, as neighbor? What do I need to work with in my own heart, my own life, so that I become a clearer channel for God's love and forgiveness? This is the work of what we call our inward journey. And there's always plenty to work on. If we have fallen into believing we ARE indeed channels of God's love and forgiveness, then we probably aren't. We've gone back to sleep. But when we are attentive to what is really going on in us, to what keeps us defensive or angry or demanding, then we are waking up. And we are becoming clear. We are becoming empty. The great thing is that not only do we make room for God's love and forgiveness to flow through us, but we also become liberated from all that stuff that has caused us so much unhappiness, anger, or fear.

So, being a channel of God's love and forgiveness in every relationship—and not just our relationships with humans but to all creation—means self-emptying, being clear. We need to have a different understanding of "emptiness," I think. I was helped some years ago by coming to understand the Buddhist meaning of "emptiness." Emptiness doesn't mean a void, a zero. It doesn't mean wiping out our selves, our identities. Emptiness in Buddhism means that we are "empty of a separate existence." We don't exist by ourselves apart from everything else. The illusion is that we are separate individuals over against each other and the rest of the world. Reality is that we are related to and even made of everyone and everything else in the universe. Are we separate from the sun and its light and radiance? Are we separate from the earth and all it produces to sustain our lives? Are we separate from our ancestors who are one continuous succession of life? Are we separate from each other and the countless ways we sustain each other? That is "emptiness". We are empty of a separate self. So I want to say that Christ is the model for us of how we are really made to live in this world, as part of this world. We do so not by grasping for our own advantage or status or "identity," as it were, but by emptying ourselves, like Jesus did, by sharing our lives, by entering fully into that interrelatedness of all life. When we are becoming empty in this way, pouring out our life in the pattern of Christ himself, then we can become full, full of God's love and forgiveness flowing through us into everyone and everything around us.