

## Lights Shining in the World

Philippians 2:1-15      *...in which you shine like lights in the world.*

The whole of scripture merits our attention as we work with our faith. Yet there are certain passages that express more vividly than others the heart and soul of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They have a depth and weight that make them worth revisiting often. The second chapter of Paul's Letter to the Philippians is such a passage.

Paul begins by writing "If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." Paul is not doubting that these things exist in the community. The "if" here has the meaning of "since"—since you already have some experience of encouragement, love, compassion and so forth. You already know something of the work of God's spirit in and among you. You have a taste of what the life of faith can mean to your life together, and to the world through you. No, you aren't perfect. You don't have everything nailed down. You are still learning what it means to love each other with the love that comes from God, that IS God. There are many times when you miss it badly, but you know something of what it's about.

So, says Paul, now that you are experiencing something about God's love lived out in community and how God's spirit can help you in these directions, keep going toward the fullness of Christ. Complete my joy by having the same mind. Paul is not telling the community that its job is to make him happy. Paul's deepest joy comes from seeing persons and communities growing and deepening their life in Christ, really maturing in what it means to be persons and communities living out of God's love.

The "mind of Christ" has to do with a deep unity of purpose and attitude and intention. It means being less quick to fall into futile arguments over who is right and who is wrong. It means not falling into taking sides, creating alliances and dividing up with those who are like us, agree with us or have the same kinds of experiences. It means remembering that the call of Christ is what constitutes us as a community, reminding one another sometimes of what we are really about and calling us back when we wander off. Being of "one mind" is awareness that we are persons and a community of Jesus Christ, embodying in our life together who he was and what he was about. Being of "one mind" DOES NOT mean having the same ideas, experiences, or particular beliefs. It means how we work with the challenges of living together as a community GIVEN our differences. It goes deeper than ideas and even personal experiences. It goes to our unity in God's spirit that we discover and receive in Christ.

Paul goes on. Do nothing from selfish ambition. In humility regard others as better than yourselves. Look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Other translations say "not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others." This is another way of talking about loving our neighbor as ourselves. Regarding others as better than ourselves does not mean denying our own personhood or putting ourselves down or letting others run over us. We are to cultivate a deep and healthy regard for ourselves as loved and cherished by God. However, this enables us, even compels us, to regard highly and to seek the well-being of others. Paul is talking about selflessness as shedding the small, insecure self that always feels the need to build itself up by putting others down or seeing others as our competitors. There is a profound security that comes from knowing God's love for us in Christ. It liberates us from the incessant search for justifying or securing our own lives, and frees us to look to the wellbeing of others.

Jean Vanier writes that we may enter the community to get our own needs met, but we stay in order to meet the needs of others. Yet I want to add that the concern for others Paul is talking about does not mean getting our own needs met by meeting the needs of others. I have seen so many times how our helping of others is driven by our need to feel good about helping others! Our help, our concern, then, is not free of the self but is seeking something from the other person, something that in reality is meeting our own need. I am re-reading Thoreau's WALDEN. There he writes that when he sees someone coming toward him to "do him good," he wants to run in the opposite direction as fast as he can! Sometimes our efforts to "regard the well-being of others" are really out of our motivation to change them, to give them help they have not asked for, and end up doing them no good at all. It is then we may realize that our "helping" was, in fact, based on our desire to feel good about ourselves, not the actual well-being of the other. Paul is talking about finding the security and freedom that comes from letting go of our self-concern so that we can truly be aware of and give right attention to the needs of others.

So now Paul brings in what is thought to be an early Christian hymn. It is a poem that speaks of Christ as being in the form of God, but not grasping or holding onto his status. Instead, he emptied himself, literally, poured himself out, and took the form,

the life of a servant. He humbled himself, which literally means something like being “lowly minded,” as opposed to “high-minded.” And he was faithful to God even to the point of his death.

Christian life has this form, this movement, not up the ladder but down, not grasping and clinging, but opening up and giving. These days we see all around us the sad futility of life when it is lived on the basis of personal grasping and achieving and accumulating. The life that is not moving in the opposite direction--the ladder going down, the opening of the hand and heart, the low-mindedness of teachability and non-domination--is the life that is headed sooner or later to collapse of meaning and harm to oneself and others. For the Christian community, the pattern and movement of true life is seen in Jesus himself.

The poem now speaks of Christ’s elevation by God, of every knee bending, every tongue confessing Jesus Christ as Lord. But this elevation comes ONLY on the basis of what was said before. This can never be reduced to Christian triumphalism, that “ours” is the only way and everyone who doesn’t make a confession of faith in Jesus Christ is going to hell. It was only because of Jesus’ utter humility and self-emptying that he experienced God’s power of new life, of lifting up. And that is the only way we can experience it, as well. The world and persons of other faith traditions hear the Christian Church talking a lot about the truth that it has. However, what is not often seen is that truth embodied in Christians themselves. Other religious traditions are not the problem. WE are our own problem, when we are not embodying in our lives and our life together the truth we proclaim. That truth is the life of self-emptying, of not seeking our own status, of taking the form of a servant.

Paul then urges the community to keep on with the life it has undertaken, whether he visits them or not. They need to keep working seriously with this life of faith, making it their own. They can’t do it just because Paul might show up! They are to “work out their own salvation with fear and trembling.” That is a powerful statement. We are to work out our own salvation. It is not just a matter of God’s love accepting us unconditionally, and the thing is over. We have to DO something with that. We have to make it real in our own lives. We have to work with embodying this new life of God’s love in Christ within the realities of who we are and where we live and the challenges we face. I take this as a very exciting statement, not something dreadful and heavy. God’s love for us and the world is to become embodied within our own real lives. The decisions we make. The relationships we form. The work we choose to do out of our sense of God’s call. The loving acceptance we extend to ourselves and others. The growing awareness of the world around us as God’s good creation. All of these things are to become real for us within the fabric of our own lives. It is a struggle, for sure. We encounter things in ourselves and around us, and with each other, that make us work at it. But this “working at it” brings the fruit of deeper faith, faith that comes from experiencing the truth of God’s being and love.

“With fear and trembling.” I don’t think Paul is talking about being afraid God is going to punish us if we mess up. It probably has more to do with what Hebrew Scriptures mean when they speak of “fearing God.” It is not being faithful because we are afraid of getting clobbered. It has to do with awe, with wonder at the majesty and mystery of God who made heaven and earth, God who made our very own lives. It has to do with living our lives within that sense of mystery and of the sacred dimension of life.

Finally, in the verses I added to our reading for today, Paul acknowledges that the world in which the Christian community at Philippi lives is messed up. It is a “crooked and perverse” generation. Paul is talking about human beings and societies who have lost their way, who are perpetuating suffering for themselves and others. I think the Christians at Philippi and in other early communities of Jesus had the same experiences that we have as we work with living faithfully in today’s world. Periods of hopelessness. Bouts of anxiety and severe doubt as to whether this life of faith stuff might just be a house of cards or a wish-dream. Why try to live this kind of life when the whole world seems to be bent on self-destruction? Paul’s word to them, and us, is that in the midst of all of these things, as overwhelming as they may be, you are shining like stars in the world, in the night. Have confidence in this: As long as you are grounding your lives in God and God’s love, as long as you are striving to work out your salvation, making this Christ-mindedness real in your life and your life together, as long as you are seeking that downward path of self-emptying and servanthood, as poorly as you think you are doing it, as hard as it may be sometimes, you are shining like stars. Or as Jesus said among the very first words he spoke in the Sermon on the Mount—You are the light of the world.