

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
Year A, RCL
September 27, 2012
North Fork Ministries
The Epistle
Philippians 2:1-13

If then 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. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

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I couldn't resist preaching from the epistle today. Partially because I find it one of the most beautiful passages in scripture – a poetic description of what it means to be a Jesus' follower, calling us to humility, even as the Son of God humbled himself. But also because in this letter that the Apostle Paul wrote from prison to the members of the fledgling Christian community in Philippi, I think there is much wisdom and encouragement for us, as we stand together as a Christian community in an age of pandemic.

From time to time you have heard me preach a sermon like I'm going to today. A sermon in which I call to our collective mind who we are as a people of God. Identifying, based on hours spent sharing your tears and enjoying your laughter, listening to your dreams and hearing your fears, and then echoing back to you those characteristics of our community that make us "the little church with the big heart". But then sometimes the tables are turned and **you** tell me, clearly, who you are – demonstrating a level of generosity that I couldn't of imagined, pushing the boundaries of what it means to be an inclusive community far beyond my expectations, and showing a mindfulness of the needs of others in which the Apostle Paul would have taken pride.

In March of this year we stopped holding worship services inside the church building. There were no palms on Palm Sunday, no chorus of Alleluias on Easter morning. We stopped having church, but miraculously, we continued to be the church. We began holding worship services on-line. Our spirit of gratitude each week of the Easter Season buoyed by a five-year-old child's voice, proclaiming "Thanks be to God, Alleluia". With the arrival of spring we tilled the soil and planted our Common Ground Garden, aware that this year the garden's bounty would be more urgently needed than ever before. Sharing the kitchen of our sister church, Holy Trinity, we began offering take-out and delivered meals to hundreds of families each Sunday evening throughout the spring. Then we opened our little free pantry, and daily we begin filling it to overflowing, and under-fed people throughout the community found, and still find, sustenance there. And this summer, for the first time in the history of Redeemer, we sponsored a seminarian, Elliot, and sent him to the School of Theology, in Sewanee, Tennessee to be formed as a priest – clear evidence that we believe and are committed to the future of our church. And any day now I expect to receive a message from our Bishop, calling for a congregational meeting, the next step in a process that will result in the Church of the Redeemer regaining its lost status as a fully recognized parish in the Diocese of Long Island. And throughout the long spring and summer and now into the fall, you have been calling one another, caring for one another, reaching out to each other, building community in the age of pandemic. Not allowing the divisions within our country to affect our love for one another and our desire to be of one mind in Christ.

And even behind masks, I can see by the sparkle in your eyes and the nods of your heads, and by your generous giving, that we are "in full accord and of one mind", "having the same love", "looking not to our own interests, but to the interests of others."

A few years ago there was a book written by the psychologist Roy F. Baumeister and the science writer John Tierney, called *Willpower*. They contend that willpower, whether it's the ability to say no to a chocolate covered donut or the capacity to "look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others", is like a muscle that can be strengthened with exercise or fatigued with overuse. In the

short term, they say, willpower is a limited resource and so should be used sparingly, but in the long run, with practice, our willpower can be strengthened and our capacity to do what we already know is right and good for ourselves and others increases over time.

In community, in a place where members have agreed among themselves to lift one another up, there is room, there is luxurious space to allow the muscles of compassion and sympathy to flex. To let go of selfish ambition and conceit in an atmosphere in which it is safe to do so. In an atmosphere in which, you have every reason to expect that you will not be alone in striving to cultivate a sense of humility and self-emptying. The church, at it's best, is a training ground, and as I've said before, a school of love.

Ours is the kind of community in which we can be strengthened by association with one another. A place where we are called to imitate the Christ and a place where we can be ourselves. A place where we can be true to the faith we profess and, at the same time, be true to who we really are. Imitation of the Christ is not pretense. Imitation of the Christ isn't dressing up on Sunday morning and putting on a sanctimonious attitude. Imitation of the Christ is allowing that which is best within you, that which is good and holy and right, to rise to the surface.

David Bartlett, Professor of Homeletics at Columbia Seminary, points out that in the NRSV, the translation we typically read here, there is one translation in the text and another in the margin. The first reads, "Let the same mind be in you that **was** in Christ Jesus." And the second, "Let the same mind be in you that you **have** in Christ Jesus." As Professor Bartlett writes, "The first reading suggests a Christian ethic of imitation: 'Do what Christ did.' The second reading suggests a Christian ethic of participation: 'Be who you are.'"

Growing a church in the Season of Corona, presents all kinds of opportunities for us – a chance to more fully serve people in need, a place to guide our young down a Godly path, a place where our hearts can experience moments of contemplation and transcendence, and a place where we can share the good news with more people through on-line services. But today, the prospect that thrills me most is the thought that whenever we step beyond the bounds of our church property, that Paul's prayer for the people of Philippi, will be a prayer for the people of Redeemer as well, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus". Imagine that every time you walk, or drive, or ride your bike anywhere on the North Fork, that there is the sense that you have entered holy ground. And that upon entering, everyone you encounter is treated with encouragement, consolation from love, fellowship, compassion and sympathy. Imagine our home here as a place of remembrance, a place were we intentionally recall that we are to take on the mind of Christ. Imagine our church as a place designed to remove the focus from our own needs, ambitions, desires and bring our attention to the wellbeing, hopes, suffering, and joy of others.

Paul ends this portion of his letter like this, "for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." But take note, the "you" used by Paul in Greek was plural, not singular. If Paul were a native Texan, like me, he would have used, "ya'll". He would have written, "For it is God who is at work in ya'll, enabling ya'll both to will and to work..." We have important work to do, and we have the will. May God bless the work to which we are called, together, to accomplish."