

Philippians 2:1-13 God's Mind
September 27, 2020

Time often gets the best of me. Five years ago when I came here to be the pastor in Delaware, I decided, for the first time in my ministry, to make use of the lectionary to guide scripture selections for the weekly messages. I do not take this as an absolute practice and I reserve the freedom to deviate from it, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and in good baptist fashion. One of the dynamics is the three year cycle. The readings are repeated once every three years. That means our texts for today were also the texts for the day back in September of 2017.

The reading from Philippians is one of my favorites, and if it wasn't in the lectionary, I would probably select it *more* often, not less, than once every three years, and I confess that it seems like yesterday when it came around before. The earth spins, like a top, and I have a hard time keeping up.

The other main texts are characterized by tension and conflict; the one from Exodus about the incident at the place they called Meribah, at which Moses struck the rock with his staff to produce water, and he became frustrated at the continued lack of faith among the people; and the gospel reading about the question of by which authority Jesus was producing miracles, and also the parable about the church of the man with the two sons; one that said he would but didn't, and one who said he wouldn't and then did.

I don't think we like tension so much, I know that I don't, and we live in a tension-filled time. I am reminded daily, and I hope that you are too, that the bible was written to people, and for people, and by people who also lived in tension-filled times. And that makes them more or less like us, and we like them.

We share the same kind of failures; fear, selfishness and greed, anger and frustration, self-righteousness and judgmentalism. And we share the same kind of strengths; we can be generous, kind and compassionate, forgiving, filled with love and goodwill.

And it is this combination of both good and bad traits that creates the tension in our souls, and in the church and the world, that characterizes so much of the drama of salvation that is the Christian gospel. This text from Philippians Chapter 2 is important, and so needed, and it is up for grabs today as it was in 2017 and will be again in 2023.

We know from our reading of Paul's Letter to the Philippians, filled up with so much about peace and love and joy, that there was conflict in the community there. We know because Paul addresses it directly in chapter 4. Given who we all are as human beings, I guess it is naive to think we could make it through life without uneasy tension. Our text this morning leaves no question about how we are meant to handle it.

Paul tells us that we should do a kind of informal analysis about our experience with Christ, and that if there has been anything good, then it would make his

joy complete if we would find a way to be like-minded, “having the same love, being united in spirit and purpose. I confess that being “like-minded” almost sounds like Paul thinks there is a chance that Christians might be more likely than not to agree about things. After 2,000 years we are forced to conclude that such is an unrealistic vision.

Perhaps, likely even, it is not necessary to agree about things in order to be like-minded. It is not necessary to agree about everything to put on the new self, and live by the spirit, to understand that we are all people of restoration, reconciliation, and resurrection. One of the features of our text this morning is that in it we are asked to go against what seems like nature, that is, we are asked not to be pre-occupied with ourselves and our own situations and our own ideas, rather:

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

The Mind of God

And then we are given again the great example of the way God thinks, the way in time we will come to think. That example, of course, is Jesus. The poetry of this hymn is powerful and deserves to be repeated over and over so that it stays in our minds;

“ . . . who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. But made

himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.”

This example is not natural to human beings, and we must confess not natural to *us*. But it is *God’s* mind. The great inner tension of our lives is caused by this conflict between the self as a means to an end and as an end to itself, and the idea of the self as a conduit of humility, service, and sacrifice, and of God’s grace and power.

But this is a tall order, and 2,000 years of Christian history reveals that no generation of Christians, no group of believers has delivered itself from this tension. So Paul gives this word: look at Jesus, the crucified Jesus . . . and keep working at it. This is an interesting idea coming from someone who says the we are justified by faith, not by works. But this one continued effort to work at humility and service and sacrifice *is* the result of our faith.

Keep working at it. With fear and trembling. Because, to be sure, it is God working in us, “to will and to act according to God’s good purpose.” And that is the gospel news for us today.

Time often gets the best of me, the earth spins, like a top, and I have a hard time keeping up. But I am confident that the time is not long away, when by the renewal of our minds, our attitudes will not look so much different than that of Jesus, than they have in the past. Praise be to God.

2 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the 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 grasped;

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 confess 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 according to his good purpose.

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