

No Matter What: Unify

Philippians 2:1-4

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In 2009, journalist and social commentator, Bill Bishop, published a disturbing book entitled, “The Big Sort.” In it he traces the decades-long pattern of Americans consciously and unconsciously moving into communities of people who share their values, beliefs and ways of life. People are, to use Bishop’s words, “clustering in communities of like-mindedness”. The consequences of which include an increasing inability to understand even those who live a few miles away, and an exclusion of those who “don’t fit the mold.”

And that national trend has certainly made its way into the church. Increasingly congregations, like ours, have sorted themselves along theological and political lines. It used to be that our denominational identity was enough to hold people with divergent opinions together in community, but that is the case less and less often. And so, congregations become a kind of echo chamber in which we hear only our own opinions and perspective espoused and find ourselves less and less tolerant of other opinions and perspectives.

All of which, I think, raises the question, “What should be the foundation of our unity?” That’s what Paul is addressing at the start of the second chapter of Philippians. We’re going to hear Paul’s answer to that question, and it’s an answer that will challenge the current cultural trend.

So, open your bible to Philippians 2 if you would. We’re going to look at just the first four verses of this chapter but they are rich in meaning. Before we dive in let’s pick up Paul’s train of thought at the end of chapter 1. Remember that Paul is in prison for proclaiming Jesus as Lord and King, titles that Caesar claimed. But Paul isn’t the only one who is facing persecution. Apparently, the Philippians are as well. Remember that Philippi is a Roman colony filled with retired military personnel and known for its patriotic loyalty to Rome. Being identified as a follower of Jesus invited persecution and the risk of imprisonment. And so, at the end of chapter one Paul calls the Philippians to show a united front against their enemies and those who would

persecute them. But as we move into chapter two its going to become clear that unity against external enemies isn’t the Philippians’ only challenge. The Philippians are also struggling with unity within the church itself. And so, as we read the opening verses of chapter two we hear Paul appeal to the church to be unified in the face of internal division. Let’s start with verse one. Paul writes,

Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate?

Paul begins with four rapid-fire questions that actually aren’t questions at all. Most of our translations make it sound as if Paul is questioning whether the Philippians have experienced encouragement, comfort or fellowship. But the Greek that Paul uses here makes it clear that Paul is really making four statements. The Passion Translation captures Paul’s meaning well. It says, ***Look at how much encouragement you’ve found in your relationship with the Anointed One! You are filled to overflowing with his comforting love. You have experienced a deepening friendship with the Holy Spirit and have felt his tender affection and mercy.***

Paul knew the Philippians well. He knew that these things were true for them. And so, as he prepares to appeal to the Philippians to move beyond the arguments and disagreements that threaten their unity, Paul invites them to raise their gaze, to change their focus from their petty arguments to the magnitude of what God has done for them in Christ.

Paul reminds them that their lives, individually and corporately, are united in the life of Christ. They have been baptized into Christ. They’ve experienced the comfort of knowing that God, in Christ, has embraced them with a love that is stronger than sin and death. And finally, Paul reminds the Philippians of their unity in the Spirit. They are, by grace, the body of Christ, a singular body made up of many members. If they allow their disagreements to divide them then they aren’t living any differently than those who claim that Caesar is Lord and Savior. If Jesus is their Lord and Savior, then they’re going to live differently. They’re going to live in unity. In other words, Paul is reminding the Philippians of who they are by reminding them to whom they

belong. They are beloved children of God. They are the living body of Christ in the world. And their behavior needs to flow from their identity.

This is a really important point for us to understand. So often Christianity has been offered to people as if it were a new set of rules to follow, as if being a follower of Jesus were primarily living out a new code of conduct. But while being a Christian does indeed cause us to live differently, we don't live differently because of some set of rules. We live differently because in Christ we are a new people. We have a new identity. And that new identity as beloved children of God and as the one, living body of Christ in the world compels us to live differently. Once Paul reminds the Philippians of their identity in Christ, then he calls them to live into it by living in unity. And in verses 2-4 he tells them how. Paul writes,

Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose. Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.

My wife, Nancy, and I have three grown boys. Young men, actually. We're incredibly proud of the people they've become, but one of the things that brings us the greatest joy as their parents is how much they love one another. They love hanging out with each other, and when one of them has a problem, the other two are right there for him. I think about how painful it would be if they didn't get along, if they fought and argued with one another. That would break our hearts.

And I think that that was true for St. Paul as well. He loved the Philippians and saw himself as their spiritual father. Knowing that they were fighting and arguing with one another broke his heart. And so, I can't help but wonder if Paul isn't using just a little guilt to encourage the Philippians to get along. Maybe I'm reading between the lines a bit, but I think Paul is saying, "Hey, I'm in prison here. I don't know if I'm going to live or die. And knowing that you're fighting amongst yourselves is not only bad for the Gospel; it's killin' me. Give me a little joy here, will ya', and get along!"

And Paul not only calls them to be unified; he tells them how in a series of quick instructions. I love the way that Eugene Peterson translates these in *The Message*:

Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.

Paul points to a reality that I've seen in church community over and over again – that the seat of conflict is when we insist upon having our own way. In one church I served a decision was made to paint the bathrooms. Everyone agreed that that was a good idea. But that's where the agreement ended. Some people wanted to paint the bathrooms brown. Others wanted them painted yellow. One contingent felt strongly that the men's room should be blue and the women's room should be pink. Still others thought it should be painted whatever color happened to be on sale that week. And, of course, there were four people who thought that painting the bathrooms was a waste of God's good money. Whole council meetings were spent arguing about the color of the bathrooms. Friendships were strained. Heated arguments took place in the hallway. I'm pretty sure a few people left the church over the issue. And I really don't remember if the bathrooms ever did get painted.

Ridiculous, isn't it? And yet, with very few exceptions most of the things we argue about in the church pale in importance compared to the need for unity...unity against injustice and poverty and hatred and war. Unity for love, forgiveness, kindness and compassion. Unity, not because it's part of a spiritual to-do list but because it is part of our spiritual identity as beloved children of God and as the one, living body of Christ in the world.

Here's the deal – we all have preferences. That's perfectly natural. We see things differently, from different perspectives and through the lens of our unique experiences. That's healthy and can even be helpful in the body of Christ to expand our corporate vision. The problem comes when we can't see beyond our own preferences. And the wheels really come off the wagon when our preferences become demands, that things must be the way we prefer. That's when our unity is threatened.

Friends, before too long you're going to have a new lead pastor, and chances are that new lead pastor is going to want to try some new things and do some things differently. And your initial reaction might just be "I don't like that." And in that moment you will stand at a crossroads. You can raise a stink. Or you can gossip about it. Or you can threaten to leave the church or stop your giving if things don't go the way you want. Or...you can remember who you are and to whom you belong. And you can make a choice for the unity of the body of Christ over insisting that things be the way you want them to be. That would make me truly happy. More importantly, it's a great witness to a world that seems to have lost the capacity live in unity.

So, is there an area of conflict in your life? A place where disunity has taken root because your preferences have become demands? If so, bring that circumstance to mind. Now ask yourself, "Am I contributing to that disunity because I'm insisting upon my own way?" Be honest with yourself. And if the answer is "yes" let's pray together now about letting that go.

Let's pray...

God of all creation, you exist in unity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and by your grace and mercy you have formed us into the one body of Christ. Grant us the wisdom to discern the difference between our preferences and our demands, and the humility yield for the sake of unity. Thank you for working in us and through us to make all things new. In the strong name of Christ we pray, and together all God's people said...Amen.