

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Philippians 2:1-13
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We have wonderful scripture lessons today. My dilemma earlier in the week was which one to choose. These are all beautiful lessons, instructive, comforting, encouraging. In the end I chose to speak on Philippians today, this marvelous passage that Paul gives us. This passage is a call to Church unity. But primarily this passage was directed to a congregation. A local church. A church like this one, filled with people from different backgrounds, with different interests, different ideas. And Paul's message was that in the midst of this difference, we are united in Christ. And so Paul wants this young Christian congregation to know human beings will never see things exactly the same. We'll always have different interests, different slants, and biases. But within a Christian community everything we do and say is meant to be grounded in love. Everything. Even when we disagree with one another about matters of importance. The grounding of our life together is the love, the grace of Jesus Christ.

I just want us to look at the first part of the lesson. "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...." The biblical Greek word for sharing here is *koinonia*. It's the name of our Young Adult fellowship group. Tonight *Koinonia* is meeting at 7:10 in the Parish House. *Koinonia* is the biblical Greek word for sharing, or fellowship. We share in the spirit of Christ, all of us. It is the theological foundation of Christian unity. The foundation of everything else we claim as a church is that we're united in that Christ's spirit is with us all. Everything we do is meant to come out of that unity we experience as Christians. It's our message to the world: that human beings can unite, can understand that what we have in common is greater than what divides us.

So he talks about sharing in the Spirit and then we see the word compassion. The biblical Greek word for compassion is *oiktirmoi*. It is defined in biblical Greek as “an outward expression of a deep feeling.” The Greek word in the New Testament for compassion means an outward expression of something felt deeply internally. And in the Christian community that is meant to be love. Now we fall short of these ideals; we know that. But we are called to remember why we gather as a body. It is to be united in our worship and united in our calling to serve the world in Christ's name. Compassion can be defined as “to suffer with,” that is what we normally do in English from the Latin. But in biblical Greek compassion has more of a sense of what we feel internally being manifest in our actions.

And then Paul writes: "Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." A scholar named F. F. Bruce is one of the great New Testament scholars of the 20th century. Bruce says about this verse: "This is not a matter of making everyone see eye to eye, or have the same take practiced, or to have the same opinion on every subject." Here's the point: "Life would be very flat and dull if we all thought the same way." Life would be very flat and dull if there weren't differences. But the differences that we experience with each other can find a commonality in God's love and God's grace because we share the same Spirit, and we're to be compassionate towards one another. "Life would be very flat and dull if we all thought the same way." Christians are to be united in keeping Christ at the center – his love, his forgiveness, his grace.

Then there is one of the great verses of the New Testament: "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." Paul here is issuing one of the great calls in scripture to humility. In the Greco-Roman world humility was not a virtue. We automatically in the Judeo-Christian world think about humility as a virtue. It is clearly a

virtue in the Old Testament, and it is clearly a virtue in the New Testament. But in the wider Greco-Roman world humility was thought of as meanness, unworthiness, and so was not lauded until the ministry of Jesus. Jesus taught his followers that the essence of humility is always looking outside of oneself to the needs of others. And so we just assume in our tradition that humility is a virtue but that turn really happened with the teachings of Jesus. If you think about it, from the manger to the cross Jesus' entire earthly life was an example of humility, constantly serving others. His entire life was a picture of humility.

The Bishop of Durham in the late 19th century, a man named Brooke Foss Westcott, said: "Jesus resigned the glories of heaven to come to earth to show us love." It's an incredible insight. Jesus resigned the glories of heaven to become one of us in humility. He resigned the glories of heaven to be with us on earth to teach us meaningful humility and kindness. We'll always fall short of these ideals, but we know what we're meant to do. Every time we fall short of our ideals, our calling is to get back up and move forward. There's an incredibly insightful saying in the Eastern thought: "Fall down seven times, stand up eight." Jesus shows us what humility means.

I'm going to end with a story. It's not a long story, I promise you. It's of special interest to me, and you'll know why in a minute. I do have an interest in the former basketball coach at the University of North Carolina, Dean Smith! Dean Smith went to the University of North Carolina in 1960 as head coach and it took several years to rebuild the program from probation and other issues. By about 1965 people knew that there was something special happening, that this was a special young coach. Something really good was beginning to happen with the North Carolina basketball program. By 1966 he had the Tar Heels where they needed to be. Every year they were in contention for the National Championship. Every year! And yet for years they never won that final prize. They were the most consistently

excellent program in the country but every year in March they just couldn't win that final game. So Dean Smith got the reputation: 'Yes, you are a great basketball coach, but you can't win the big one.' And he had that hanging over his head for years - 'You can't win the big one.' Well, in 1982 they did. Think about that for just a moment. Twenty-two years after he started as head coach, for all of his success, it took twenty-two years to finally win that final prize of the National Championship. So the NCAA gave commemorative watches to the Tar Heel team. The coaches, the players, and the managers all got expensive commemorative watches. The NCAA provided twenty-two watches. But there were twenty-three people with the team, coaches, players, and student managers. So twenty-two championship watches for twenty-three people. Coach Smith became aware of this. Having finally won the 'big one', after twenty-two years of frustration, Coach Smith learned a member of the 'team' didn't get a watch. He was a student manager. The man's name is Dave Hart. He's a financial advisor over in Asheville, North Carolina. So, the day after finally winning the National Championship, Coach Smith called this young student manager into his office and handed him a box and the student didn't understand what was happening. Coach Smith said: "You are just as important to this team as anybody else." He opened the box and it was Coach Smith's watch. The symbol of finally getting it done. Coach Smith took his watch and he gave it to a student manager because his name had been left off of the list. "You're just as much a part of this team as anybody."

"Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." Amen.