

SPG#183, Pentecost 20A, Proper 21

September 28, 2008

Ezekiel 17:1-7

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

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.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

The words I just read are from our epistle reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians.

And they are some of the more stirring words from the Apostle Paul in the New Testament. But I think we often rush into a reading of Paul's writing like fast food.

In contrast to fast food, a better way to appreciate Paul is to carefully set the table with nice china and silverware and perhaps light a candle. For in the traditions of the church, particularly the early church, the reading of a letter from Paul was not just a reading, but an experience. And it can be for us too if we do not hurry through it.

Reading a selection from Paul was an experience because of several things.

First, the letter was always addressed to a particular church. The letters to the Corinthians were to the church at Corinth. The letter to the Romans was to the church at Rome. Today the letter to the Philippians is to the church at Philippi. And the church at Philippi seemed to be a favorite with Paul. For his words to them are especially kind.

Secondly, even though the letters were addressed to individual churches, they were meant to be read around in different settings, different liturgies, and in different churches.

And they were meant to be applicable to any church.

And so when one church read from Philippians, they realized that many churches had already read and experienced Philippians. And so there was a group mentality with all his letters. And as time went on, this only increased.

And thirdly, Paul always talked about his presence and absence in the letters. And Philippians is no exception. He really counted on his letters being not just a substitution for him being there in person. But in Paul's mind his letters were a re-presentation of himself in person in a different way.

So, if we take the time to appreciate these dynamics, we see that Paul's intention in our reading and hearing today is that in Philippians, as we read Paul the author, we would have an appreciation and even a connection to Paul the person, who via his writing within the word of God, claims a presence among us. And in addition, if we allow it, we may get a sense of connection to the many churches who have read and experienced the letters of Paul.

I will read these words of Paul again that I read at the first, and the words that come after them. **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.**

And then rather than giving more specifics such as being kind, or gentle, or understanding, Paul engages in a description of the person of Jesus Christ as a way of summarizing the model for virtuous community in the church. Most scholars agree that these words are a hymn used by the early church in many liturgies. He says:

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.

So Paul has specific words about being of the same mind, being of the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. But then he points to the person of Jesus as a model for all that he has mentioned and more. And he points to that paradoxical figure, beloved of God, who in his being loved by God loves others as a servant. And that is the kind of love that Paul refers to in the church. Because in the loving as a servant there is the love that has all of us being of one mind, even if we have different thoughts. And Paul seems to have a definite vision of servant loving in the church. And he says we should all be of the same mind and the same love. And he seems to be after a gentleness and a respect and an understanding and a compassion and a kindness that is employed in servant loving. Several years ago I was on the same staff with an older priest, the Rev. Bob Kem.

Bob is now retired and confined to a wheel chair. But in those years when I worked with him, he was in the last few years of his active ministry. When I came on staff with him in 1999 he was having difficulty walking. Many times, when he celebrated the Eucharist, he would lose his place. But we all knew that and we helped him find his place again.

Once in 1999 he preached the sermon. And with some difficulty he took a step up into the pulpit. After the service that day and said, "You know Charles, if I can ever do anything to help you, just let me know." He loved me as a servant. And I wanted to love him as a servant right back. And I looked for ways to do that.

I do not think we can do too much of that. It is servant loving. It is respect. It is kindness. It is gentleness. It is the mind of Christ.

We do it here. But we can never do too much of it.

Paul had a way of speaking to people. If he thought they might not comprehend what he said, he would teach them about what he said. So, in Corinthians, letters written to the church at Corinth, which was full sailors and prostitutes, he taught about love.

But in Philippians he just tells them to love as a servant, to love with the love of Christ.

And he does not teach them about something that they already know.

And so through a multitude of churches who have experienced this letter Paul the Apostle and his words come to us here at St. Paul's Grinnell. And in our experience of Paul we are called to love as servants. It may be tempting to think that we do OK at loving. That we are pleasant and courteous to most people most of the time.

But in my experience, if there is a new way to love beyond the way one is loving, then it would be loving as a servant.

If there is a next step in loving in an unforeseen way, then loving as a servant would be it. Paul called the Philippians to deliberate action, to love as servants, to love as Christ loved. We are called to that same deliberate action. If we are all involved in this loving, then the difference would be flagrantly evident. Loving the way Christ loved.

What a neat thing for a church to do. Amen.