

The Words for this Week

September 27, 2020

To Be Like Christ

This text from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians is a passionate reminder for that group of Christ followers to patterned their lives after Jesus.

Philippians 2:1-13 (The Message Bible)

2 1-4 *If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care— then do me a favor: 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.*

5-8 *Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human!*

Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.

9-11 *Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.*

12-13 *What I'm getting at, friends, is that you should simply keep on doing what you've done from the beginning. When I was living among you, you lived in responsive obedience. Now that I'm separated from you, keep it up. Better yet, redouble your efforts. Be energetic in your life of salvation, reverent and sensitive before God. That energy is God's energy, an energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what will give him the most pleasure.*

Imagine if you will that what the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Philippi was words that he was actually writing to us today. Hear these words again: *If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if*

being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care— then do me a favor: 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.

You see, Paul was writing to help guide a newly formed church to continue with following Christ. He wrote to encourage them to continue to follow the teachings of the Messiah. His letter paraphrased for them the two great commandments, to love God with their whole heart, and to love their neighbors just as they loved themselves. He wanted them to stay on the course that they were called to; he wanted them to continue to walk in the light of our Risen Savior.

If Paul was instead the noted film director Spike Lee, he might have simply wrote to say “Do the Right Thing”. Paul’s text could have also served as inspiration for Martin Luther King, Jr’s vision of the Beloved Community. Who knows, maybe even the Beatles heard a little bit of Paul’s letter when they wrote “All You Need Is Love” and “I Get By with a Little Help From My Friends”.

I am convinced, however that Paul’s letter is speaking to us today and we - as in everyone in our community and all around the world, all of us need to hear these words. As the expression goes, these words need to walk around the room. These words need to touch our hearts. Because if they do, and if we embrace them, then we can start to have a better, a more cordial, a more loving approach to everything in our daily lives. There is a location near the Boston Medical Center that is crudely known as Methadone Mile. This is a gathering of homeless people who would have been living out on Long Island, out in the Inner Harbor, but since the bridge to that island was removed because it was in such deplorable condition, the long-term rehab and treatment programs at that location have ceased and the result has been people, sorely in need of drug treatment, living out on the street, in close proximity to the hospital.

Boston, which operated the treatment center, has been in discussions with the City of Quincy about rebuilding the bridge, but Quincy has not been in favor of the traffic going through their streets as would be the case to access the bridge if and when it is rebuilt; instead they have been pushing for a ferry or water taxi service to travel to and from Boston Harbor to Long Island. So lost in this shuffle between what Boston and Quincy want are the people in need of treatment. If we step back and look at the larger issue,

which is that drug abuse and the need for drug treatment is not a Boston issue, it is not a homeless issue, it is a people issue.

Substance abuse cuts across all economic lines and if we were to dig just a little bit, we would find that there are folks within our own orbit who are impacted by this issue. The solution might not necessarily be to rebuild the bridge to Long Island, and it might not even be to establish a ferry service to Long Island, but instead to establish an effective treatment facility for those in need. Also, there is a real need for re-entry type housing for those who are homeless. And all of this could happen by embracing what Paul encouraged in his text and what we are reminded today. The need to help those who are homeless, to provide effective drug abuse treatment is not just an issue for the City of Boston or the City of Quincy, it is a real-world issue that impacts all of us. And the first step toward solving this issue is not one of bricks and mortar, but instead one that requires love for our neighbors, love for those in need, and even love for those who we might not even know.

Clearly, the political world, especially our elected leaders, need to hear and embrace what Paul wrote. Oh, I realize that Congress and the current White House administration are not a church, and that there is a well-defined provision about the separation of

church and state in our constitution, and that is a good thing. I'm talking about the great divide within our leadership institutions and it seems that each day the division increases significantly. It seems that on most days, we are only united as one nation in name only. Folks are being demonized for their beliefs and political affiliations. You know it has really gotten bad when a congressional candidate shows up at a campaign stop flanked by a group of supporters each armed with assault weapons.

Having different political positions and preferences is really a good thing; it helps us - the electorate - to better see and understand issues and policy. It serves as a good check-and-balance system within our government. And it affirms that the people's voices are being heard. Now take all of that and reflect again on what Paul wrote in his letter, and what that text is saying to us today.

You see, if the love of Christ has in any way changed us, if the Holy Spirit has in any way touched and guided us, if anything about being a Christian, about following this great creator, savior, and comforter has opened our eyes to see more than just ourselves and our own set of circumstances, then maybe there is a way for us to dialog with those who might have different thoughts and opinions so that we can find the common ground, to find what we do have in common,

and to identify how to address our ongoing issues in a manner that works for the common good.

Calling folks names, insulting them, presenting dishonest images about them might score points with those who agree with you, but that won't solve any problem, if anything it will help to create more animosity. But all of that is the opposite of what Christ taught, and what God's Spirit is calling us to embrace. We are to show that we have a heart, that we have compassion, and that we are bold enough, confident enough, filled-to-the-brim-with God's-Spirit enough to love one another, to be a good friend to one another, to offer a helping hand, a supporting word, and a comforting smile to one another.

When we do that, we reveal what is truly in our hearts. So when we donate canned and dry food to our donation basket, we are showing how God's Spirit resonates within us. When we are willing to work with the adult support groups, to offer use of our Sanctuary so that they can have enough space to meet during these unprecedented times, we are showing how God's Spirit works within us. And even when we take the time and make the effort to keep this church family connected, for us to worship even during this pandemic, be it over the Internet or by following a new protocol to allow us to worship safely in-person,

we echo the words of that great spiritual "I Don't Feel No Ways Tired".

If we have gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in our lives, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to us, if we have a heart, and if we care then let us strive to agree with each other, love each other, and to be deep-spirited friends. Let us not be self-centered, but instead let us be willing to be like Jesus, ready to love and willing to lend a helping hand. Amen.

Please stay safe and remember, *God loves you, and so do I, and there is absolutely nothing that you can do about it!* Peace and blessings, Pastor Dave