

*If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, ² make my joy complete:
be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.*

This is our second week in our series reading Paul's letter to the Philippians,
and Paul continues to encourage the church in Philippi
in living as a community in Christ.

After offering his gratitude for the ways the Philippian church has supported him
and partnered with him in work of the gospel,
Paul goes on to describe the characteristics of a Christian community –
comfort in Christ, consolation in love, partnership in the Spirit.

Notice that these qualities of mutual consolation and care are not something we
produce ourselves, but are grounded in Christ and in the Spirit.

The love we share in community is rooted in the love of God for us,
the love we all share as we walk together in the way of Jesus Christ.

Paul encourages the Philippians to be of the same mind,
and that may sound troubling to us,
if we think of it as all thinking the same thing, or agreeing on everything.

But the shared mind Paul wants us to have in Christian community
is more of an attitude, or way of being –
a shared grounding in love and mutual care.

He goes to say that each one should focus, not on selfish desires,
but on care for one another and building up the community.

This is the image of Christian community Paul lifts up –
a community in which each one puts others ahead of their own needs.

This picture of community reminds me of a description
I once heard of heaven and hell.

In hell, there is a table set with rich food and drink – every good thing we can imagine.
Each person is sitting at the table with fork and spoon,
but no one can bend their elbows.

So they sit at the feast, hungry and thirsty, and they cannot have it.

Heaven is just the same.

But in heaven, everyone at the table are feeding each other.

This is the sort of community Paul envisions – in which each one helps the others, each one contributes to the good of the community itself, grounded always in the love of God and work of the Spirit.

Paul gets to the centerpiece of this second section of the letter with these words:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, Paul says,

Who, though he existed in the form of God ...

emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave ...

This section of the letter is often referred to as the Christ hymn.

It is among the earliest writing about Jesus,

who he is and what his life and death means for his followers.

It is thought to be an early hymn or affirmation of faith

used in the first Christian communities.

These verses describe Christ as a being equal to God,

who does not hold on to his god-hood, but empties himself to become a human being and live a human life.

He is obedient to God, even to the point of being put to death as a criminal on a cross.

They describe a God who loves and longs for us so much

that God enters fully into human life,

not putting on a human suit for a day,

but submitting to all the indignities and joys and sorrows of human life, including death.

And Paul reminds us that it is in our imitation of Christ –

humbling ourselves for service – that we become fully human,

and live the abundant life Jesus offers.

God's downward mobility in Jesus, and God's call to us to live in similar humility and service, is radically counter-cultural, now as in ancient times.

On the Working Preacher commentary, NT Professor Karoline Shaner reminds us

to look more closely at the social and political context

at the time that the New Testament was written.

Ancient Rome was a culture fascinated by power and military might.

Shaner writes,

The Roman Empire erected stone monuments carved with images celebrating the empire's power over the people it had enslaved.³ In [some of] these images, Roman emperors hold female figures by the hair exposing anguished faces and twisted bodies. These "patriotic" images celebrate the Roman Empire's power over the people (both men and women) it has enslaved. The emperors are depicted as god-like in their triumphs. There is no mistaking the bald power over those deemed weak and/or dangerous enemies.

In some ways, Shaner continues, the Christ hymn in Philippians (2:6–11) explicitly rejects such grotesque celebrations of power. ... Contrary to Roman images, the poem states clearly that divine power does not include the right to dominate and subdue other people. ...

Through verse 8, the Christ hymn is clear: domination, conquest, exploitation—exactly the "patriotic" images that the Roman Empire embraced—are antithetical to divine power. Jesus' death and resurrection reject our human displays of power and violence. Violence, fear, and death are not God's plan. Structures of human leadership that glorify dominance over other people; [leaders] who criminalize black and brown bodies, who objectify women, and who exploit poverty, work against God's justice. They are sin.

Shaner's words invite us to take a look at our own context –

at a government that revels in use of military power,
pouring money into weapons
while claiming we can't afford child care and health care for our citizens;

At a culture that idolizes wealth and power and fame,

allowing some people to hoard resources
while others lack basic needs of housing and food security.

As I read Shaner's commentary, I couldn't help thinking of the statue of Trump –

15 feet tall and covered in gold leaf –
erected this week at his golf course in Florida
and dedicated by evangelical pastors.

Leaders around the country are comparing it to the golden calf in the bible

- an idol that distracted God's people from worship of God
at a crucial time in their history.

To be clear, the statue was not created with public money, nor is it on public land.

But it seems to point in the direction our nation is moving.

Our American culture is embracing more and more the idea that might makes right, that if you can take it and keep it you deserve to have it.

Beneath the surface, it is embracing more and more the insidious theology of glory, which claims that God rewards the faithful, and the poor are undeserving or lazy or somehow not favored by God.

The witness of Jesus calls us to a different kind of community, a different kind of society, in which all people are valued, and resources are shared so that all have what they need to thrive.

That is the community we are called as God's people to create.

Although our nation is not a Christian nation –

it is a nation full of beautiful diversity of religion and culture –
our Christian call is to work for policies that care for people in poverty and support our most vulnerable neighbors.

Paul follows the reading of the Christ hymn with an admonishment that the Philippian saints should

“work on your own salvation with fear and trembling.”

And before we Lutherans tremble at the words “work out your own salvation,” because we know that that no works of our can merit or earn our salvation, Paul continues, “for it is God who is at work within you.”

Paul recognizes that our salvation is a gift of God's grace,

and that it is the Holy Spirit who empowers us to live our lives in Christ.

God gives us what we need – And – we have a part to do in living out our faith.

The community doesn't work *for* salvation;

we are called to work *because of* salvation.

To work out our salvation is a response to grace, not a condition to receiving it.

Part of that working out of our own salvation is the work of discernment – of discovering what it is that we are gifted and called to do, as a community of faith and as individuals.

Our work of discernment and living our vocation in Christ involves us sharing in the humility of Christ – involves our own self-emptying.

It is important here to recognize, in our discernment of self-emptying, that some people are already positioned in society in ways that empty them; or perhaps are never giving the change to be filled in the first place.

Too often, Christian leaders – often white men – have been glad to let others – women, people of color, poor workers – do the self-emptying and service, while they maintained status and power.

The community Paul encourages – radical now as it was radical in the ancient world – is a community in which all are valued and cherished for their gifts and baptismal identity, and all participate in self-emptying to care for one another.

In this second chapter of Philippians, Paul calls the church into the work of following Jesus – work that is pleasing to God,

work which we do in the love of Christ, by the power of the Spirit.

Paul calls us into the counter-cultural work of humbling ourselves, for the sake of lifting one another up in community and caring for the needs of all.

Thanks be to God for the invitation to love and the gift of such communities of care. Amen