

“The Movement of Faith”  
Philippians 2:1-13  
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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine  
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This morning we continue our study of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, turning to the first half of chapter 2. Last week we heard how Paul remains confident that no matter what happens to him while in prison, he will continue to find reasons to rejoice. “Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my salvation” (1.18-19). In this amazing statement of faith we see that Paul’s confidence is rooted in a reality beyond his present day circumstances. Though he’s in prison facing a criminal charge that could lead to his death, he trusts in God’s power to bring about deliverance. And he’s grateful for the prayers of his friends who are supporting him during his time of trial.

When we turn to chapter 2, Paul begins to move the conversation along to address some of the issues happening in the congregation. Since he’s away and not sure when he will return, he offers instruction and teaching to his beloved friends. Let’s turn now to the beginning of chapter 2. I invite you to read the bold parts indicated in your bulletin insert:

If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection 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 empty 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.**

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he existed in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

**Therefore God exalted him even more highly**

**and gave him the name that is above every other name,**

**so that at the name given to 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.**

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence but much more now in my absence, work on your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Have you ever eavesdropped on someone talking on the phone? Back in the day when I was growing up, that was not a hard thing to do! We started out having just one phone in the house, and though it had a long cord, I could easily hear what my mom was saying even if I wasn't trying to listen. Speaking rather loudly to her brothers or close friends, my mom's voice could easily fill several rooms. As a child it was interesting to listen to her conversations, but I soon realized I was only hearing part of it. Though my mom liked to talk a lot, I could not hear what my mother's conversation partners were saying - and so this would often leave me somewhat curious or puzzled about the topic at hand.

We have a similar situation happening when it comes to understanding Paul's letters. We can read Paul's words directed to the various churches, but we don't have the other side of the conversation. We know the Philippians and other Christian communities wrote letters to Paul about their joys and struggles, but unfortunately we do not have those letters to read. They are lost somewhere in antiquity. So when it comes to biblical studies, this leaves us in a position to make educated guesses, to infer what might be going on behind the scenes. For example, in the verses right at the end of Philippians chapter 1, Paul encourages his friends to stand firm in one spirit, to strive side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel and not to be frightened by their opponents (1.27-28). This information tells us that in light of the Philippians' struggle against some unnamed opponents, Paul is concerned that they stand together, that they work out their differences and be of one mind for the faith of the gospel. Though we don't know exactly what's going on in the church in Philippi, it's clear that Paul is concerned about their willingness to stand together.

So when we turn to the beginning of chapter 2, it should not surprise us that Paul is continuing this call for unity. In fact, he tells the Philippians that if they want to make his joy complete, then they should be of the same mind, have the same love, and be in full accord with one another (2.2). In a deeply emotional appeal, Paul urges them to remember the love they share with each other, as well as their partnership in the Spirit (1.1). On the basis of this love, Paul gives them very clear instructions on how they are to live together: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty 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" (2.3-4).

What powerful words we have here! If we had to pick only a few guidelines to follow as a church, I don't think we could come up with anything better! In these two short verses Paul gives his friends clear marching orders - if they want to make his joy complete, then they should come together as one body, with one mind and one love - they are to let go of ambition and conceit and instead, practice putting others before themselves. If I was Paul, I don't know if I would have said the same thing. Honestly, I would be tempted to say "Make my joy complete by sending me more food or money so I won't starve, or "make my joy complete by finding a way to get me out of this Roman prison!" But Paul's joy is rooted in something else beyond his circumstances - he finds his joy in knowing that the church he helped to start is living in a manner worthy of the gospel, that they are "standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel" (1.27). Later in his letter Paul refers to a dispute that has come up between two women leaders in the church,

leaders who have strived side by side with Paul in the work of the gospel (4.2-3). Again, we don't know much about the conflict but if you have been around strong willed Presbyterian women you probably aren't surprised there would be occasional tension! Again, if I was Paul I would be tempted to lecture my congregants on the dangers of disunity - to give illustrations on why fighting and territorialism weakens the witness of the gospel. I might be tempted to take sides in the disagreements, to try and work it out myself. Or perhaps I would tell stories of how I have seen conflicts ruin other communities. Believe me, there's lots of stories that could be told when people do not honor or love one another.

But once again, we see Paul do a remarkable thing. Instead of telling stories like these, he tells another story altogether - he tells the amazing story of Jesus. He quotes what scholars believe to be one of the earliest hymns of the Christian faith, a song about the story or the movement of faith. It begins with Jesus who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, as something to hold onto. Rather, Jesus did an amazing thing! He emptied himself, took on the form of a slave, and he became human. He was born in the most humble of ways, to Mary and Joseph out in the barn with the animals - and after living a life of love and service he was unjustly arrested, and he became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross - the form of execution reserved for society's lowest criminals. But as we know, the story does not end there. The movement of faith is that God highly exalted him, giving him the name that is above every other name, so that at the name given to Jesus, every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord!

As a former math nerd, I love that this movement is much like a parabola - Jesus starting with God up in heaven, taking the path of downward mobility in the incarnation and eventually his death, and then being raised up by God through the power of the resurrection and then the ascension to the right hand of God. This movement is what we will say together in the Apostles Creed today - it's the movement of God coming to be with us, of Jesus suffering out of love for us, and God exalting him, bringing life out of death.

While this movement can make math and theology nerds happy, we have to remember the point that Paul is making. He is not so much interested in teaching the Philippians what to believe rather than teaching them how to behave. Presbyterian preacher Tom Are, Jr. puts it like this: "Discipleship is not a matter of getting our doctrine right; discipleship is a matter of getting our relationships right." Yes, doctrine is important - what we believe about infant baptism, what we believe about predestination or about women and leadership in the church - all of that is important - but doctrine serves a higher purpose, and that purpose has to do with how we relate to one another. In other words, having the mindset of Christ is NOT about everybody thinking the same things. "Rather, to have the mindset of Christ is to live in the world the way Christ lived in the world" ([Joy Even on Your Worst Days](#), p. 57) and that is through the way of love and service, the way of putting the needs of others before your own.

In our culture today, practicing humility is really hard! We have become so divided in our opinions and so isolated by our silos of information, that it's hard to regard others as better

than ourselves. This past spring a group of us participated in a [Resetting the Table](#) workshop, with the goal of practicing how to courageously listen to others with whom we may disagree on important issues. I found the workshop a helpful step towards putting into practice the type of humble listening Paul is advocating for. It only makes sense - if we really want to love others, looking out for their interests and not our own, then the first step is really listening to others, and communicating to them that they really are heard. Hearing another person does not mean that you agree with them about whatever the topic is. But hearing another person is a way of centering things not on what you think or feel, but on another person who (like you) has been created in the image of God. As our country has become more and more partisan and divided than ever before, deep and courageous listening is desperately needed. (In the coming weeks look for another opportunity to practice *Resetting the Table* skills, something that will be open to everyone.)

Yes, humility is hard! And I think there's an important difference between the way our culture defines the practice of humility and the way it's described here in Philippians. We are often taught that being humble is about simply not boasting about yourself - not being a braggart - and instead, putting yourself down so that you can put the focus on others. [Tom Are](#) makes the point that as we consider the Christ hymn - outlining the incarnation, suffering and death of Jesus as an act of humility - it's clear that Jesus takes this path NOT because he thinks poorly of himself, or that he thinks of himself in some "less than fashion" (Are, p. 58). In fact, humility is really not about us at all! It's really the by-product that results when we consider those around us in an honorable fashion. "When we see others as valuable, when we see the beauty and worth of our neighbor, humility is the natural result" (Are, p. 58).

And isn't that what the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about? The amazing good news that the Creator of the entire universe saw us as valuable, saw us as beautiful and worthy to be loved, even on our worst days?! Indeed, Christ is humbled because of what he sees in you and what he sees in me, and out of great love he came to set us free. (Are, p. 61) Each Sunday when I pour the water into the font, we are reminded of the way Christ poured out his life for us - offering us forgiveness and cleansing us by the mercies of God's grace. The same action happens at the Table, when we see the cup of salvation being poured out for the forgiveness of sins. In Romans Paul writes that we all have fallen short, we miss the mark and fail to be the people God intends us to be. But as a wise person once said, "That's the truth; but it's not the whole truth" (Are, p. 61). While "There's a constant temptation to let ourselves be defined by the worst in us and to let others be defined by the worst of them..." that is not the way of Jesus Christ! "Christ does not ignore that the world in which he chose to dwell is a sinful mess" - clearly it is a mess! But the gospel is the good news that "our sin does not ultimately define us." As [Tom Are](#) has said so aptly, "No one is defined by the worst in them but by the best in God" (Are, p. 61). By God's amazing grace we are God's beloved children, and there's nothing in life or in death that can change that! May we continue to walk in the way of humility, inviting those around us to trust in this good news.

To God be the glory, now and forever. Amen.