

God is at Work Within You
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God is at Work in You

The church I belonged to while at seminary was a lovely, supportive community. It was a smaller church, probably about Pilgrim's size. It did good ministry.

One year, however, the community had an episode of guerrilla warfare in its midst. The conflict: whether or not to have the US flag in the sanctuary. (Now, so we all can enjoy the rest of this sermon and not fret, don't worry, I am not going to lead an inquiry into whether or not flags should be in Pilgrim's sanctuary. That is a nice juicy topic for your next settled pastor.)

Anyway, here is what happened. One summer when attendance was light, the anti-flag person decided she would remove the flag and store it in a closet. She thought no one would notice. Well, when the pro-flag person returned from summer vacation, boy, did she notice, and rummaged through the sacristy to find the flag and rehang it before worship the next week.

The anti-flag person then used the next week to take down the flag and hide it in the coat closet. The pro-flag person was furious that the flag was now wrinkled and she ironed it and hung it up again. And so on and so on. The congregation had a problem. And in many ways it had nothing to do with the flag. It had to do with how these two women talked or didn't talk to each other and the respect or lack of respect they had for each other's view. They were certainly not of one mind focused on Christ.

Something like this was going on in the church at Philippi. Paul is sitting in prison, maybe in Roman, maybe in Ephesus, we aren't sure which. He is writing to the church at Philippi which was a prosperous Roman colony in northern Greece, a church he founded and had found much comfort there. They have also been very generous in their support of his other missions in other areas.

But Paul isn't happy because there is trouble brewing in Philippi. And this letter is a plea and a love letter to the folks at Philippi to address what is dividing them and come back together.

Paul lays it on thick in the beginning.

"Do you love me enough to want to help me? Does it mean anything to you that we are brothers in the Lord, sharing the same Spirit? Are your hearts tender and sympathetic at all? Then make me truly happy by loving each other and agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, working together with one heart and mind and purpose."

He is leaning on their love and support for him to get them to turn around and offer the same love and support to one another.

"Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. Don't just think about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and in what they are doing."

We aren't sure exactly what is going on. We have hints later in chapter 4 of this same letter where Paul writes, "Therefore brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way my beloved. I urge Euodia and Syntache to be of the same

mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companions, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel.”

So Euodia and Syntache are having a fight, they are causing strife in the congregation and Paul wants the community to come in and help them see each other as partners in the ministry of Christ, and united with one another and the community once again. To be of one mind focused on the ministry of Jesus.

What are these two women fighting about? It could be anything. Philippi was a rich town. It could be a fight about money: who gets to spend it and on what. It could be about how they worship: what are the proper words or the proper music or the proper way to offer thanks to God. It could be about who could join: could you join as a Gentile, one not circumcised.

But from what Paul continues with saying, I have a feeling it was much more about giving up something that many of us hold dear: status and being right.

Philippi was a wealthy Roman town. Folks there would be used to a certain amount of status. What they say would be heard and adhered to in their circles. They were important. They had control over their own destinies and decisions in their lives. And a big part of Roman culture was upward mobility. How could one gain more status, more honor. How could one get into politics or have a greater voice. How could one make more money. How can I get my way.

Paul instead gives the church members the example of Jesus who gave up all honor, glory, and status to live as a human being who then died the dishonorable death of a criminal. Paul's words it stands in stark contrast to the honor-seeking that prevailed among Roman aristocrats in society. Paul speaks of downward mobility: the way of relinquishment and honoring others. That ultimately the life of Christ was better than the life of Caesar.

What did this mean for the church at Philippi

“Paul invites the Philippians to embrace God's story as their new story. In other words, he reminds them that through Christ they are no longer defined by their earthly genealogies, worldly histories, or even by their societal and cultural norms. In very practical terms, this means that the God they serve is not like the Roman Emperor who acquires power through force and who thrives on people's fears. Likewise, this means they are not to be like the people around them who share this same attitude and who persecute those unlike them.”
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We have seen this play out writ large as our nation and our President speaks out about NFL football players taking a knee during the National Anthem. There is name calling. There is shouts of disrespect on all sides. There are debates about whether it is better to take one knee, to sit, to stay in the locker room until the anthem is over, to link arms.

But really, what one does during the national anthem is not the point. The point that one man Colin Kaepernick was making is trying to shed light on the stats of unarmed black men being killed by law enforcement in America.

Outrage is sweeping the country about what folks are doing during the national anthem. But shouldn't we actually be outraged about the deaths in this country, the land of the free? Are any of us free when someone else is not free because the color of their skin makes them 2.5 times more likely to be shot and killed by police officers. And unarmed black men are five times as likely to be shot and killed as unarmed white men.

What would it mean to be of one mind in this situation? It does not mean we have to take a knee ourselves, or even agree that it is an appropriate statement or venue for that statement.

What it means is that we should listen--what is going on in our nation that makes a young talented athlete give up everything--millions of dollars, the chance to play in the pros, a chance at glory and super bowl rings--to make this statement? To be of one mind is to ask the question, what is happening here? How can I understand it? How does Jesus speak to us in this situation?

Paul speaks to this. He reminds the community that they need each other. That the diminishment of one is the diminishment of all. We need one another to be fully who we are. This was at odds with culture in Philippi. It is at odds with American individualism culture too. But it is a lot of what the message of Jesus was all about.

Desmond Tutu is an Anglican Priest serving in South Africa explains it beautifully in this way: "One of the sayings in our country is Ubuntu – the essence of being human. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality – Ubuntu – you are known for your generosity. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole World. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity." Desmond Tutu

In a nutshell the Ubuntu philosophy is, "I am, because we are"

Today we celebrate World Communion Sunday. As we lift the bread we think of our brothers and sisters across the world doing the same thing, celebrating the same life-altering message of Christ. We lift the cup and share in the fellowship, the renewal of God's covenant with us as people, the unity we have as one community.

We need one another. We need to be of one mind says Paul , humble, not selfish, concerned with the other. Paul urges unity. Unity does not mean agreeing on all things or peace at any price. Unity means standing together even as we disagree even as there is conflict and not holding on to the need to be right. It means embracing humility. And not being selfish. Counter cultural in Paul's time and equally counter-cultural in ours.

We can be respectful to one another even in our disagreement. As one quote says: Apologizing doesn't always mean that you're wrong and the other person is right. It just means you value the relationship more than your ego. How we are together is as much if not more important than what we are discussing.

Because we need each other. Paul understood this. Despite his prestige, his widespread church planting, he understood that he needed the faithful in these congregations. He needed their prayers. He needed their financial support. He needed their shared belief in the power of Jesus Christ to change lives.

Today on World Communion Sunday we take a step back to remember that as well. We need one another. And not just us sitting in this room. We need others across the globe, others who remind us of what is important, others who offer compelling visions of God working in community. That in our increasingly isolated society, we come together to remember that we are incomplete without one another. That we need our unity.

Ubuntu, "I am, because we are"

I need you to fully be who I am. You need each other to fully be who you are called to be. This church needs the community and the community needs this church to be who they can fully be in the world.

Here at Pilgrim church we are called to be of one mind. To listen, to humble ourselves. None of us has to be right, none of us has to be most important or have the final say. we are called instead to be compassionate listeners

In our nation we are called to be of one mind. Not to give up disagreeing with one another but to humble ourselves to hear one another, to hear the hurt of the oppressed and the left out. To listen and respect each other. None of us has to be most important or have the final say.

As a part of the world, a member affected and affecting every other nation and peoples, again we are called to be of one mind. To see each other as partners in this purpose. Not America first but the world first, all peoples first.

For God is at work in us. In me. In you.

God is at work in you. And there is ministry and hope and love and blessing that will come forth from you, from you, as you follow in the way of Jesus Christ.

Amen.