

One in Humility
Philippians 2:1-11

Unfortunately, the question for us isn't whether we have conflict within the church: for there has always been conflict within the church, and apparently the church at Philippi was no exception. Yes, as long as sin remains in the world, clouding our minds and influencing our desires, there will always be something for Christians to disagree on.

Now, some of these things are obviously important, even essential to the preservation and proclamation of the Christian faith. And one of the big blessings of being part of the EPC is that we have defined and written down the things we consider to be the essentials of our faith: it's a one page document, and you can find it on the EPC website. Moreover, all our teaching elders, ruling elders and deacons must receive and adopt the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, which summarize a lot more of what we believe the Bible teaches on many subjects. I think we would all agree that the Scriptural truths contained in these documents are worth vigorous disagreement, even to the point of changing denominations if that's what it takes to uphold them.

But let's be honest: most of the disagreements in most of our congregations don't come close to that level of importance most of the time. Instead, we all too often find ourselves at odds over the sorts of musical instruments that should be played in worship, or which hymnal we should use or what the color the carpet in the Sanctuary should be. Yes, it's all too easy to think that our personal tastes and preferences are important enough to divide our congregations, isn't it?

And so, the critical question for every group of believers is not whether we will have conflict, but instead how we will handle that conflict, and within that conflict how we will treat each other. In short, in spite of our differences, how do we move toward the like-mindedness of which Paul speaks?

Of course, we Southerners tend to answer this question by avoiding it, by doing our best to paper over or ignore any conflict that may arise between us. And when we have a disagreement that is too important to be swept under the rug, or when someone really hurts our feelings, we just say, "Well, bless your heart," and then never speak to that person again. Of course, we soothe our consciences by insisting that we are the reasonable ones, that we are perfectly willing to be reconciled, to let bygones be bygones – if only the one we consider to be the offender will apologize to us first. But going out of our way to mend fences with someone else? Reaching out to someone else in order to acknowledge and settle a disagreement? Oh no, that's just not the Southern way.

But is the Southern way in fact the Christian way to deal with conflict? After all, Paul insists in verses 1 and 2 that all Christians have one consolation in Christ. We have all been encouraged in the same way; we have all had our hearts warmed by hearing and responding to the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. In short, we are joined together, united to one another by our union with Christ. In a very real way, we have been made one in the bonds of love: love for Christ and love for one another.

Okay, so what does such unity and such love require? The same thing that every relationship involves: hanging in there, especially when we disagree, because our essential unity, our commitment to be in relationship not only with Christ but also with one another is more important than whatever petty disagreements may divide us. I mean, you wouldn't walk out on your husband just because he leaves the toilet seat up, would you? You wouldn't let the fact that your friend cheers for another football team keep y'all from having fun at the deer camp, right?

Well, Paul tells us that we Christians share the deepest, most important bond that anyone can experience: the fellowship created by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. And remember: we Presbyterians know that God is the One Who took the initiative to reach out to each one of us, calling us to be His own, uniting us to Himself and filling us with His Spirit. So, who are we to reject other Christians, those whom God Almighty has chosen to be our brothers and sisters in Christ? To push one another away for whatever reason is thus to deny the reality of our oneness in the Spirit.

Yes, it is all of these unifying things that should cause us to have "bowels and mercies" toward one another: that's a King James way of saying that our inward parts, the very core of our being, should be filled with mercy and compassion toward one another. That's the reality that Paul wanted to be lived out in the Philippian Church, and that's the same reality that all of us should desire to see in the First Presbyterian Church of Port Gibson, and in Yokena Presbyterian Church and in the Presbytery of the Gulf South, and really among all Christians everywhere, regardless of citizenship or race or denomination.

But how do we get there from here? How can we truly love others whom we have hurt or who have hurt us so deeply? How can we truly be likeminded in spite of our sometimes vehement disagreements? How can we truly be of one accord?

Well, the first thing we need to do is to take a close look at our own motives. For in verse 3, Paul warns us against acting on the basis of strife or vainglory. That means there is simply no room in Christian ethics for selfish ambition or pride or conceit.

So, we need to be honest with ourselves: are we refusing to be reconciled with our brothers or sisters simply because we can't stand to admit that we might be wrong? Do we allow old grudges to fester simply because we insist on having our own way? If so, maybe we need to have an attitude adjustment.

For remember: among the fundamental requirements for joining any Christian Church is to make a confession that we are nothing more than sinners in need of a savior. In other words, every Christian has publicly admitted that he or she has in fact been quite wrong about quite a few very important things. So all of us should be willing to confess that, since the remnants of sin remain within us, we could still be wrong and even blind, especially in situations that are not essential to the faith, situations in which earnest Christians honestly disagree.

But verse 4 insists that we must go even further. Yes, we must abandon any attempt to get our own way, but we must also be equally concerned with the interests of others, even if, and perhaps especially if those interests conflict with our own. In other words, when we disagree with someone else, we need to be just as anxious that he win as that we win, just as desirous that he get his way as that we get ours. For when you get right down to it, that sort of determination to bless the beloved regardless of the cost to the self is the essence of true love.

Now, think about what a church that consistently behaved in such a loving, self-sacrificial way would look like. Would there be any conflict if everyone was really more concerned about others than about themselves? Would there be any long-standing grudges or hurt feelings if everyone was really doing their best to reach out in love even to those who hurt them? Could there be any arguments that go on and on if everyone was willing to admit their own fallibility and to consider others' opinions as more important than their own?

In short, the solution to our disunity can be boiled down to one phrase that we find in verse 3: lowliness of mind, or in more modern terms, humility. Simply put, if we Christians will abandon our pride and embrace true humility, we will grow closer together and closer to Christ. And that's because of something that is perhaps even harder for us to believe: Jesus Himself modeled the same kind of selfless humility in a radical way.

Now, it really doesn't make any sense for Jesus to be humble. I mean, He is the Son of God, the Living Word, the One through Whom everything was made that was made. As we read and sang this morning, a mighty host of angels shouted His praise at His birth, hailing Him as the Christ, the Lord. There couldn't possibly be any greater reason for anyone to be proud, could there?

But Jesus wasn't proud, was He? No, as Paul reminds us, Jesus didn't hold on to the rights and privileges that He undoubtedly deserved. He didn't insist on the glories and comforts of Heaven that He enjoyed. No, Jesus emptied Himself by taking on the lowliest, least significant of human forms, being born to impoverished parents in a stable and laid as a helpless infant in a feedbox for animals. And after He grew up, even though He was perfectly righteous and innocent, He continued to live out His role as a servant, humbling Himself to the will of the Father to the point of being willing to die on a cross.

And why was Jesus willing to humble Himself like this? Because he loved us. Because He thought that it was more important that sinners like us should live than that He, the perfect, spotless, Lamb of God should avoid the pain and shame and death of the cross. Yes, Jesus put us, sinners like you and me, a rabble of rebels against His righteous rule, ahead of Himself. That's what real humility looks like. That's what real love looks like.

Now, I want you to think again about one of those people, a Christian brother or sister from whom you feel estranged. And let's that you have a really good reason to be upset with him or her. Let's say that certain someone really did you wrong. Let's even grant for the sake of argument that you really are completely innocent of any blame concerning whatever it was that separated you two.

Is that person any more of a guilty sinner than you are in the sight of God? Are you more righteous than Jesus was when He went to the cross? And if Jesus could humble Himself before a sinner like you, shouldn't you humble yourself before that person who did you wrong? And if you have the Spirit of Christ within you, can you do anything less?

Now, I know I've quit preaching and gone to meddling. And I know how hard it is for us Southerners to look any sort of conflict squarely in the face. But just imagine the joy that we could all experience during this Christmas season if we really followed the example of the Babe in the Manger, if we really humbled ourselves, if we actually took the initiative to reach out, to seek reconciliation with one another. What if we could carefully and prayerfully and sensitively approach those people whom we have hurt, honestly and earnestly apologizing for what we have done and asking for their forgiveness? What if we could carefully and prayerfully and sensitively approach those people who have hurt us and tell them that we love them and that we forgive them and that we want them to be our friends again? Could there be a better way to celebrate Christmas?

For we can't escape the amazing truth of Christmas, and really of the whole gospel: that in Jesus Christ, God humbled Himself, reaching out to those who had done Him wrong, giving Himself completely to those who had sinned against Him. Yes, as we gaze in wonder on the Babe in the manger, we celebrate the good news that God loved us enough to take upon Himself all the misery and suffering that our sins caused Him, just so that we could be restored to a right relationship with Him, just so that we could be His children.

Yes, displaying genuine, humble, reconciling love for one another: could there be a better way to follow Jesus? Could there be a better way to proclaim the good news of the lowly Babe in the manger this Christmas? And no matter how difficult it might be for us, could there be a better way to reveal the glory of God to our self-centered, sin-sick world?