

Making Space
Philippians 2:1-13
September 17, 2017

Rev. Nancy F. Dolan
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

Last week on our first Festival Sunday, we kicked off our CONNECT theme for the year, with the fall emphasis on connecting with one another. Our Scripture reading for the day was from John's gospel, chapter 17, in which the gospel writer describes the intimate connection between Jesus, God and *us*. This relationship is one of unity, a one-ness, and oneness with a purpose – to reveal God's love to the world.

In today's reading, the apostle Paul writes to the church in Philippi, encouraging unity. His letter is as much for the church then as it is for the church, and for us, today. Hear now God's Word to you this morning, from Philippians 2:1-13.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion 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 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 was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of 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 out 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.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Paul is worried about the church. Considering he's in prison when he wrote this letter, you might think he has a lot more to worry about! But this *is* the reason for his writing. He cares about the Philippians. They have become friends – friends by their shared purpose of bringing the gospel to the world. That's why we're together too, you and I, us with each other, connected for God's purposes.

But with people being human and all that means, conflicts seem to have risen within the church in Philippi. In the midst of that they are facing persecution from those who don't follow Jesus, and, according to Paul, a distorted gospel from those who say they do. Paul knows that their mission will be all the more challenging if they are not united. If they are not of one mind. They too need to be connected.

Now, when Paul encourages the Philippians to be of one mind, he does not mean one opinion or always in total agreement. (So that's a relief!) What Paul is asking of the church, is that we be of the *same mind that was in Christ*

Jesus. His letter suggests that there is unity and full accord when we possess the same attitude as Jesus. The mind of Christ.

But, what does that mean? We can expect that it doesn't come easily. The prophet Isaiah says that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor God's ways our ways" (Is 55:8). We don't come by the mind of Christ easily, if we even know what it means. Paul does go on to explain what he means by the mind of Christ; but I'm warning you, it gets harder before it gets easier! This mind of Christ is one of emptying. Jesus, says Paul, who was in the form of God, *emptied* himself and took the form of a slave; he humbled himself and he became obedient.

Emptying is a foundational part of the Christian discipleship. In fancy terms we call it the kenotic journey – this process of self-surrender that leads to new life; it's a process that describes Jesus' own life. This passage from Philippians is typically assigned in the lectionary on Palm and Passion Sunday. It often gets overlooked for the familiar parade of palms and the passion narrative. But Paul's words provide meaning to the loss and gain that Christ experienced. God came in human form, not as God but as a servant, to love and serve, and show the way to eternal life. Our own kenotic journey is a lifelong journey of faith, as we continue to let go of what's keeping us from fully living into the love God has for us in the perfect union with God and each other.

But while this journey of emptying has its rewards, it's purpose is not self-serving; it's not about obtaining a place next to God. Yes, Jesus was highly exalted in his obedience, but that was not the goal. That was never the goal. He humbled himself not for his own interests, but to love and serve others. This is the humility Paul is urging the church in Philippi to model – *do*

nothing from selfish ambition...look not to your own interests but the interests of other.

We can each make a laundry list of the aspects of ourselves that we need to empty to have this mind of Christ, to be able to put others' interests first. At our best we do work at it, as we pray God will help us to let go of our need to control, our fear of failure and judgment, our criticism of others, our doubts, our agenda...oh gosh, the list is great. And believe me, do I have a sermon or two on that. I know because I'm preaching to myself every day! But as we dig deeper into this meaning of the "mind of Christ" at this particular time in the life of the Christian church and the life of our own church, I want instead to take our thinking to the collective level. Paul is writing to the church, so that they can be stronger to fulfill their purpose of spreading the gospel. So what does this passage mean for us as a church? What emptying is required of us so that we achieve our purpose in the kingdom of God?

This month the study team for our pastor search will come together. This is the group that will help us dig deep, to look forward and prayerfully discern what God is calling us to next, so that the Pastor Nominating Committee will know what kind of pastoral leader we need for our future. If we truly open ourselves to what God will show us, this discernment process will involve some emptying. If indeed we desire to be good stewards of this moment in time in our church's history, to be transformed through this experience, we will be called to let go, looking not to our own interests, as Paul urges, but to the interests of others.

That is the exciting work before us; exciting when we trust in God's provision and care. Yet, if this process had a warning label it might read, "Caution! Letting go may be required!" In other words, we may have to empty

something to make space for what God is doing. God says to Isaiah, "do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (42:19). Often we don't, because we are hanging on to something else and can't see the new thing that is coming. I heard someone say once, "Don't miss the door that's opening before you because you're staring at the closed door behind you." Sometimes emptying means letting go of agendas and plans because our focus on them is keeping us from seeing what God has in store.

This letting go could change all our questions as we discern our future. Shifting from our own interests to the interests of others calls for a radically different approach. Think about it. Instead of, "How can we return to what *I* enjoyed about the church?" it's, "How can I better hear what feeds *others* here?" Instead of, "How do we support our existing programs?" it's, "How do we let go of programs that no longer meet people's needs so we can make space for what does?" Maybe instead of trying to figure out how to bring people in, it's about going out to ask what people need around us. This is the humility Paul describes, not conforming the church to our needs, but asking how we can be church to others.

A great deal of our study during this time, and you will have an opportunity to participate, will be to explore how the context for church in North America has changed so significantly. Many of us don't need a scholarly book or distinguished lecturer to know that. Church is no longer at the center of society. Our sense of morality and ethics is more likely to be shaped by secular influences than religious convictions. Church on Sunday no longer drives the collective rhythms of the week. The list of religious and spiritual options today is endless; and the institutional church is less and less the option

desired. We can see the letting go happening around us. Yet really, to what degree has the mainline church emptied? To what extent are we hanging on vs. letting go? If we as a church are to shift from focusing on our own interests to the interests of others, it will take some emptying.

Emptying can be painful sometimes. Christ knows that pain. And we know that following Christ includes the dying part; not death as in end of life, but death as in the *beginning* of life. We are Easter people. We believe that death doesn't have the last word but instead makes way for something new. As we humble ourselves to follow Jesus, we find our old selves dying and God making us into something new. We are changed.

The church exists for the world, not just for ourselves. We do care for one another, that's an important part of who we are, but that's not why we exist. We exist to reveal God's love. Paul is urging us to unity in this one mind of Christ so we can be what the world needs. Which brings me back to our CONNECT theme.

I want to close with a challenge for each of us. We are building back up our connections with one another in Christ so we are resilient for God's mission for us, and for the hard work of emptying that will be a part of that. As we focus on connecting to each other this fall we are discovering as we go that this also means re-connect.

Many have mentioned how meaningful last Sunday was, and also how you missed those who weren't there. We feel we are getting our feet back on the ground, that the future is promising, and we want to include those who have drifted I want to urge you to do just that. You know who is missing. You know how to reach out to them. This is our call right now. To re-connect. It's easy to assume why they are not here, or that they don't want to be here. It's

natural to not want to offend or be rejected. But Paul in this passage is saying to put aside those concerns, and look to the interest of others. Sometimes all it takes is a nudge.

This week, after being gone a while from Wednesday's Women's Bible study, we were excited to have one of our members back. The group had missed Jan, like others who haven't been there in a while. And Jan told us she was back because another member, Corinne, came by to say she was missed, and to bring a card from the group. Jan explained that it was nothing about church that was keeping her away, instead she was devoting her time to her husband who had been ill. Now that he is so much better, she said, she just needed a nudge to get back into the routine. And Corinne's visit was the nudge that she needed.

We can all be that nudge. We will be stronger moving into our future when we are together; together and united in one mind of Christ. It will take some emptying. But today we are reminded that Christ's kenotic journey of emptying did not diminish him, but instead revealed the fullness of who he is. Our own just might do the same. By God's grace, and for God's glory, may it be so.