

"Deep-Spirited Friends"
Philippians 2:1-13
September 27, 2020
York Center Church of the Brethren
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Everything I need to know about being a Christian I learned at my Grandmothers' dinner tables. I was born and raised in the church- attended worship and Sunday School nearly every Sunday, went to Vacation Bible School and church camp. I even have a Masters of Divinity degree from studying for three years at a reputable seminary- and still- the most important things I need to know about living as a follower of Jesus I learned at my Grandmothers' tables. I am grateful to my mother's mother, Edith Louise Myers Shirey, who we called "Nanny" and my dad's mother, Mildred Lucille Scott Waltersdorff, Grandma. Here is what I learned:

* Everyone is welcome. If we run out of room at the table we will set up another one.

- There is always enough food to go around.
- Always say you are sorry.
- Help each other.
- Always be kind.
- Don't kick your sister.
- Treat others as you wish to be treated.
- When one of us would get into someone else's business during the meal, Nanny would say, "Mind your own plate."
- When my sisters and I were mean to each other Grandma would say, "Don't be ugly."
- Do everything with love.
- Never play favorites.
- Always say "thank you" and mean it.
- Don't act like you are better than anyone else.
- You will always be forgiven.
- You aren't expected to be perfect.
- Listen to each other.
- Be patient.
- Don't kick your sister.

You would think the Apostle Paul knew Nanny and Grandma because all of his letters to the churches were filled with similar important reminders of **who** they were and **whose** they were. When Paul wrote to the Christians he loved in the churches he knew, he didn't waste paper telling them that they should adhere to certain doctrines or debate theological arguments. He didn't give them creeds to memorize. He said things like: agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front. Help others get ahead.

One glance in the New Testament and you know that the Apostle Paul was a letter writer. In those days there were only three ways to communicate with people, especially those who lived far from you. You could go to them and talk with them in person, you could send someone in your place to talk with them, or you could write a letter. Paul was a prolific letter writer. He traveled from town to town, preached the good news of Jesus Christ, started house churches, called leaders to serve the churches, then moved on to the next town. The longest he stayed in any place was about two years.

His letters were his ministry in absentia. Now and then he would send Timothy or another of his trusted ministry partners to visit a church, but mostly he wrote to them. Because they knew Paul, they could hear his voice when they heard the letter read aloud during worship. Because Paul knew most of the churches well, he could speak to their deepest needs and their biggest problems. He could name individuals and offer praise or correction.

Paul didn't write his letters expecting them to be compiled into "The Holy Scriptures." He wrote to particular people in particular house churches in particular towns at a particular time in history. He did not send out mass mailings addressed to "Occupant." Fred Craddock noted, *"Mixed in the chemistry of his letters one finds always some of the local soil."*

His letters were intimate and personal, but they weren't private. They were written to be read in worship to the gathered believers. They were written to be remembered and to elicit a response. He usually included familiar hymns and prayers. His letters were written to be received by ear, not by eye. There was only one copy, after all, and not everyone could read. The letters were carefully passed along from one house church to the next.

Of all the churches Paul started, the Philippian church may have been dearest to his heart. At the time of this letter, Paul was likely locked away in a Roman prison cell. He writes to encourage the Christians in Philippi in their faith and to let them know how he is doing.

Lest we think the early church had it all figured out and everyone lived faithfully and happily together- this letter reminds us that conflict and disagreement were constant

threats. On top of inner dissension, they were also persecuted from the outside by Roman officials and even by some of the Jewish religious leaders.

It wasn't an easy time to be a follower of Jesus Christ, so Paul writes to remind them why and how to remain firm in their faith and in their relationships with one another. Our text for today offers a blueprint for Christian conduct within the faith community.

The foundation for their (and our) actions and attitudes is to be Jesus himself. Paul reminds them of what they already know. *"Agree with each other. Love each other. Be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front. Don't sweet talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand."* (The Message)

Paul's greatest hope is harmony in the church. We don't know for sure what was causing the conflict among the Philippian Christians, but it sounds as though some people may have begun to imitate the hierarchy found in the Roman world. In an effort to call them back to where they belong, he urges them to "be of the same mind as Christ."

This doesn't mean that they will all agree with each other all the time. What it means is that they will have a common attitude, an agreement about the basis for their relationship. It means imitating Christ. And then he shares what has been called "the Christ Hymn." It is perhaps, one of the most well-known snippets of scripture. It may have been a familiar hymn at that time.

"Jesus Christ, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant, 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 Creator." (2:6-11, NRSV)

Paul quotes this beautiful and powerful hymn to remind the Philippians that their life as a community was formed by the gospel. It is built on love, joy, fellowship, partnership, affection, unity, and faith. Paul helped to build their foundation, so he knew they had what it took to reaffirm their commitment to each other and to Christ.

Fred Craddock captured well the problem in the Philippian church, and in the church today, when he wrote, *"Paul regarded as inappropriate to the body of Christ the selfish eye, the*

pompous mind, the ear hungry for compliments and the mouth that spoke none, the heart that had little room for others, and the hand that served only the self." (1)

Selfish individualism has no place in the church, or in our families, for that matter. Paul says that such individualism is a contradiction to the gospel which speaks of a Christ who was first and always the servant of others.

Paul doesn't write to his friends to scold them. He writes to remind them of the relationship that created and defined their life together- their relationship with the Risen Christ. He writes to remind them to be the kind of community that they already are in Christ Jesus.

Nanny and Grandma didn't let us get away with anything- bad behavior, a disrespectful attitude, unkindness- were not welcome at their tables. Somehow, they knew what the ancient Jews believed, that once the blessing is said at the table, that table becomes a holy place, and eating together is a sacred activity.

You may have noticed that it isn't always easy to live in harmony in a family or in the church. And I would even say that there are times you need to step away from a family or a church that is abusive and destructive. In our world today division and disagreement are the language of the realm. A family and a congregation that can keep their focus on the unity of Christ even as they disagree, is blessed indeed.

Writer Kathleen Norris writes honestly about the church. *"The church is still a sinful institution. How can it be otherwise? It is a human institution, full of ordinary people, sinners like me, who say and do cruel, stupid things. But it is also a divinely inspired institution, full of good purpose, which partakes of a unity far greater than the sum of its parts. That is why it is called the Body of Christ. And that is why, when the battles rage, people hold on. They find sufficient unity and a rubbed raw but sufficient love, and even the presence of God." (2)*

One of the best explanations I have ever read about the importance of the Body of Christ, the fallible church, is by writer Anne Lamott. When asked why she made her young son, Sam, go to church, this is what she wrote, *"I make him because I can. I outweigh him by nearly seventy-five pounds. But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by.*

Most of the people I know who have what I want- purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy- are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, who practice their faith. They are people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful.

Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, who are out there on the streets and inside praying, and they are home writing letters, and they are at the shelters with giant platters of food.

When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me to hold on. The church became my home in the old meaning of "home"- that it's where when you show up, they have to let you in. They let me in. They even said, 'You come back now.' That's why I make Sam go to church." (3)

The Apostle Paul, Grandma, and Nanny all seemed to know that it's all about how we treat each other. In the church and in a family- the purpose of our life together is to love each other, encourage each other, feed each other, challenge each other, and live together in the light of Christ.

May we be deep-spirited friends. May we be sisters and brothers who can count on each other, who can lean on each other. May it be so. Amen.

End Notes:

- *INTERPRETATION SERIES, PHILIPPIANS, Fred Craddock, John Knox Press. 1985. P.38.*
- *AMAZING GRACE: A VOCABULARY OF FAITH, Kathleen Norris, Riverhead Books, 1998. P. 273.*
- *TRAVELING MERCIES: SOME THOUGHTS ON FAITH, Anne Lamott. Anchor Books. 1999. P.*