9/30-10/1-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Philippians 2:1-13 Of the Same Mind World Communion

I always think of my ecumenical family on this weekend when we celebrate World Communion.

Today I have family members who worship in a variety of Christian denominations, from United Methodist, Presbyterian and United Church of Christ to Lutheran and Anglican.

Trust me when I say we are not of one mind when it comes to worship styles and songs, local church organization or denominational policies. On many things we agree to disagree, while not allowing our differences to divide us. Yet on one thing we do agree, on the basis of our faith we are of the same mind: Jesus is our Savior and our Lord.

Today, we gather to celebrate World Communion, giving thanks for our place in the greater body of Christ, the family of faith, the church. Today’s passage is the lectionary epistle reading for this weekend, a timely message for this day when we come to the table to share in the bread broken and cup poured all for all humankind. Yet it is also a hard message to hear in the midst of the reality of the world around us.

For today the apostle Paul says to us: Be of the same mind. Have the same love. Be united. Agree with each other.

Be of the same mind. Is the apostle Paul out of his mind?

How can we be of the same mind when our family members don’t agree, our local congregation members don’t agree, our 9-million-member denomination can’t agree, and there are many divisions among denominations in our world today? Be of the same mind? If this even possible when we are divided by denominational, theological and cultural lines?

How can we also be of the same mind in the midst of a world today that is screaming at us 24/7/365 with competing voices all clamoring for our attention? Advertisers, media commentators, athletes and actors, financial gurus, parenting experts, bosses at work, spouses at home, coaches, teachers, preachers, friends, and then there is the voice within and then there is the voice of God.

Which voices do we follow? Who do we allow to influence us? Are we paying attention to voices of anger or voices of calm, voices that put us down or voices that pull us up? How do we pay attention to the word of God that tells us to love one another and be of the same mind when the world around us is screaming constantly for us to choose a side, on every issue that divides us?

Whenever you feel overwhelmed by the competing voices around us, remember—we are not the first, nor will we be the last, who struggle to focus on what unites us rather than on what divides us.

Bishop Will Willimon recently shared the story of the very first church he served. He recalls:

..I was a student at Emory [University] at the time. I drove out to the church on Saturday to meet with the lay leader. He met me at the little one room church, then named, "Friendship Methodist Church." (Which was a misnomer if there ever was one.) I got there before my host so I thought I'd go in the church and look around. But I was surprised by a big padlock and chain barring the front door. When the lay leader arrived I said, "Glad you are here to open the lock on the door." "Oh, that ain't our lock. The sheriff put that there," explained the lay leader. "Things got rough here at the meeting last month. Folks started yelling at one another,

carting off furniture they had given to the church. So, I called the sheriff and he came out here and put that lock on the door until the new preacher could get here and settle 'em down."

--Bishop Will Willimon “One in Christ” 10-1-17 day1.org

Two years ago as Assistant to the District Superintendent I was invited to one of our rural churches whose pastor refused to pay any connectional giving. Supposedly I was invited to share the missional importance of our connectional giving, yet the more I talked, the more I knew that the local pastor, who admittedly was only pseudo-Methodist, would never be of the same mind, and in fact, was never going to have an open mind to the ministry of our greater connection. And he was influencing his congregation to be of the same mind as he. I imagine he would have been shocked to realize not all in his congregation shared his same views. Before I left the parking lot one of the women present that night came over and lamented the close mindedness of her congregation. She was a local school teacher, respected in her district, yet fearful to open her mouth in her congregation. The only reason she remained there was her husband.

If I were to ask you to name the ways we agree and the ways we disagree, would you think first of what divides us rather than what unites us? Most of us would.

There will never be a perfect church, even as we strive to be of the same mind. For every church is filled with flawed human beings.

Consider even the first disciples, those closest to Jesus, were not perfect. One doubted what he did not experience firsthand. Two argued over who was the greatest. One often spoke before he thought. And another became a traitor.

Where two or three gather, Jesus does promise to be with us. Yet where two or three gather, disagreement will also follow. Can we disagree in love? Can we allow for differences of opinion in ways that don’t belittle or silence dissenters through fear or power or intimidation? Can we strive to be of the same mind, when the mind we all strive to be like is the mind of Christ?

The church in Philippi was much like our church today—it was an established church, founded by Paul yet running on the strength of its local leaders. It was a faithful church, generous in its hospitality, generous in its financial support of Paul, and generous in its prayers.

Yet like many established churches, like many mainline denominations today, the church at Philippi was threatened by internal dissent. What type of tension was present there we do not know. What we do know is that Paul heard of their tensions, and since he was unable to physically travel to the congregation at Philippi, Paul penned this letter of timeless encouragement. He reminded this beloved congregation that when they face trouble that threatens to divide them, to put their minds and hearts to the task of being of the same mind, Spirit, and love that was in Christ Jesus.

Earlier in the letter Paul had written, “Live together in a manner worthy of Christ’s gospel. Do this, whether I come and see you or I’m absent and hear about you. Do this so that you stand firm, united in one spirit and mind as you struggle together to remain faithful to the gospel.” (1.27 CEB)

Building on that call to live in one spirit and one mind in a manner worthy of the Gospel, Paul now goes on to appeal for community unity and individual humility to make it so. He proclaims that only through being of the same mind as Jesus can we even begin to consider being of the same mind as a fellow believer.

Listen to how Paul’s words are translated in *The Message*:

Paul says to us: “If you’ve gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you *care*—then do me a favor: 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. Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself.” (1-5 MSG) “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” (5 NRSV)

This led me to think, what is the mind of Jesus? It is the mind of someone who is humble, not thinking of personal qualities as more important than the skills of others. It is the mind of a servant, willing to risk personal comfort or glory or even death in order to share God’s love with others. It is the mind of someone who will allow the glory of God to shine through them rather than have their own personal star shine bright.

So the first quality we are to cultivate if we are to be of the same mind as Jesus is humility.

Ken Blanchard points out, "Humility does not mean you think less of yourself. It means you think of yourself less." -preaching.com

John Riskin once said, "I believe the first test of a truly great man is his humility. I do not mean by humility, doubt of his own power, or hesitation in speaking his opinion. But really great men have a ... feeling that the greatness is not in them but through them; that they could not do or be anything else than God made them."

- *Today in the Word*, August 5, 1993. Sermonillustrations.com:humility

Rev. Scott Hoezee equates humility with honesty, in contrast to pride. He reminds us that:

..William Law used to talk about “the reasonableness of humility.” What he meant is that humility is simply a sane, sober, honest recognition that we’re all pretty much the same. We all have things we do well and things we do not do so well; we all have gifts in some areas but not in others. Humility is simply the rational recognition of these common-sense facts. Pride, on the other hand, is irrational–it’s insane to think you’re the center of the universe, crazy to believe that you could get along just fine without other people. It’s sick to think that everyone should pay attention to you in a way that you yourself never pay attention to others.

Humility makes you celebrate the fact that we all need each other. And when that is your basic attitude toward other people, you will be naturally inclined to lend them a hand in service if they need help or just to lend them your love during ordinary times when they’re doing their work. Because, you see, humility connects us to others even as pride isolates us.

Kennedy biographer Nigel Hamilton says that Joseph P. Kennedy, the father of the Kennedy clan, was such a proud and arrogant man that he would banish from his home any guest–including the friends of his children–whom he felt did not give him enough attention or confirmation of his views. The result, according to Hamilton, is that after a while only the obsequious and the boring and the shy were permitted in the Kennedy compound, thus depriving the family, including the future president, of the kinds of contacts that could have broadened their horizons and challenged their thinking.

Again, pride isolates whereas humility connects.

--Scott Hoezee cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters

..At a reception honoring musician Sir Robert Mayer on his 100th birthday, elderly British socialite Lady Diana Cooper fell into conversation with a friendly woman who seemed to know her well. Lady Diana's failing eyesight prevented her from recognizing her fellow guest, until she peered more closely at the magnificent diamonds and realized she was talking to Queen Elizabeth! Overcome with embarrassment, Lady Diana curtsied and stammered, "Ma'am, oh, ma'am, I'm sorry ma'am. I didn't recognize you without your crown!" "It was so much Sir Robert's evening," the queen replied, "that I decided to leave it behind."

*--Today in the Word*, April 3, 1992. Sermonillustrations.com: humility

Humility thinks of others first. Which leads us to have a servant attitude toward others, not thinking first of our own needs, but being attentive to the needs of others.

Jan Avery, a district staff member years ago, modeled for me how to live looking to the interests of others rather than my own interests. She often focused on missions, including a trip or two to Haiti. She made sure there was plenty of good food to eat at district functions, even though her diet was limited to only organic products. And at a workshop I once heard Jan proclaim that if the loud, contemporary music was what touched the hearts and souls of others in her congregation, she was willing to wear earplugs to worship.

To emphasize Christ’s servant attitude, an attitude we are then to cultivate, Paul quotes the words to what was then a classic hymn of the early church. Imagine early believers meeting in homes, caves and along the river bank singing these words like you and I sing our favorite hymns of faith.

The ancient hymn quoted by Paul proclaims in words and song the story of our redemption through Christ, beginning with Jesus’ humiliation which only then leads to Christ’s exaltation.

6Though he was in the form of God,  
        he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.  
7But he emptied himself  
        by taking the form of a slave  
        and by becoming like human beings.  
When he found himself in the form of a human,  
8        he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,  
        even death on a cross.  
9Therefore, God highly honored him  
        and gave him a name above all names,  
10    so that at the name of Jesus everyone  
        in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow  
11        and every tongue confess that  
            Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (6-11 CEB)

Jesus emptied himself then humbled himself, even to the point of death on a cross. Only then did God exalt Jesus, and our Savior becomes our Lord, who deserves our worship and honor and praise.

Jesus thought of others before himself, and this has always been a counterculture narrative for Christians to follow, from the earliest days in the Roman Empire to our American culture today.

Roman aristocrats lived by a code of honor that always aspired to move up the society ladder, so to speak. American culture values those rags to riches stories of men and women who overcome all odds to be a success and epitomize the American way. Neither are the way of Jesus. Jesus laid down his life for others. Jesus went from the riches of heaven to the rags of the cross before returning to the throne of God. Jesus exaltation only followed self-sacrifice. His was not the road of easy street or participation trophies. His was the road of humble sacrifice for all of God’s beloved children.

Paul quotes this hymn as a way to say, only as music can, “Here is the glory you proclaim in song. Here is who you claim to believe when you lift your voice in praise. Now is the time to live what you sing. Go, follow in the footsteps of Jesus.”

If Jesus did all of that for us, If God loves us so much that he sent his son to die for our sins, then raised him from the dead to offer us the hope of resurrection, then how do we respond?

If we believe that God claims us as beloved children, forgives us through the death of Jesus, and offers us hope through the power of the resurrection, then how can we live in unity, learning together to set our hearts and minds and ways on the heart and mind and example of Christ?

We may not always agree on how to live out our love for God and love for neighbor, yet can we find ways to support one another as long as Christ’s love is shared and Christ’s name is lifted high?

Our passage today concludes with Paul encouraging us that if all of what we sing about Jesus is true, then we are to figure out a pattern of daily living and thinking and forgiving that honors the one whose name we claim. This is not works righteousness, proclaiming we are saved through what we do. Rather, we are called to live in such a way that reflects our faith in Jesus who has already saved us.

Paul encourages believers this way: “Friends, keep on doing what you’ve been doing from the beginning. Better yet, redouble your efforts. Be energetic in your life of salvation, reverent and sensitive before God. That energy is God’s energy, an energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what will give him the most pleasure.” (v12-13 MSG)

Gary G. Kindley reminds us,

..It matters what we do and say. We make a difference in this world. The difference that we make can be enormous when we allow the power of God to work through us.

While sitting in a hospital waiting room, I overheard a woman who was talking about her church. Her voice was loud, her tone was critical, and her audience was clinging to her every word. I did not know the woman. I never did hear the name or denomination of her church.

It did not matter; what she said had that familiar ring of famous quotations and complaints often heard by pastors and church leaders:

"We never did it that way before!"

"Pastor, I'm so glad you preached that sermon today.

There are folks who need to hear it (of course, I'm not one of them)."

"I remember how Pastor ——— used to do things."

What if that woman's comments were someone's only impression of the church of Jesus Christ?

[What if when we go out to eat following worship and are critical of the service, the preaching, or one another, then tip cheaply, that is the only impression of Christians our waiter or waitress sees?] For the sake of the gospel, even when the cheering stops, we must be about the work of Christ. This is the true test of discipleship: obedience to God and fidelity to Christ's church. How we live. Whom we love and forgive. What we believe. Such a life, anchored in God, is not hindered by the passing storms of life. --Gary G. Kindley, ministrymatters.com

When we live in unity, when we live by humility, when we strive for the same mind of Christ, and therefore open to God’s Spirit working in and through and among us, then we make Paul’s joy complete. For we offer an alternative narrative to the world. A way of unity, a way of grace, a way of hope, a way of faith.

In a few minutes we will share at the table of our Lord, in the sacrament of Holy Communion. The bread and the cup of Holy Communion reminds us what unites us. And that is our common faith in Jesus as Savior and as Lord. The liturgy echoes our Scripture today, a prayer that proclaims: “Make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.”

May we go forth to love God and to love neighbor, together as the body of Christ in this world, striving to love and live by the same mind as Jesus.

May it be so. Let us pray.