

Philippians 2: 1-11 "What Are You Thinking?" 10/25/20

I confess I have had something stuck in my mind that simply will not leave. It has been brewing in my brain since it was apparent we were headed for the purple tier of our state's COVID restrictions – gyms and indoor dining, churches, bars, and public buildings were shutting down again. I could understand the outcry from businesses and individuals whose livelihoods were at stake, but what didn't process in my mind was the hateful and misinformed rhetoric going around. You have heard me say before that the verbal abuse and immature threats slammed on our Board of Supervisors were both unnecessary and destructive, but this past Thursday's meeting was beyond sad. I am all for freedom of speech and opinions but the level of aggressive disrespect toward others was disheartening, especially in the presence of younger minds. I couldn't help but ponder, "What are you thinking, acting this way in front of your child... what is the lesson your child is learning regarding the care and treatment of others? What is motivating these folks and how do we find common ground?" The people I was most impressed with were the ones who, rather than insulting and guiltting the Board, offered ideas, suggestions, and compromises to explore a way to work together for a resolution which benefits everyone.

It would be nice to say that the church can lead the way in how to handle such matters but we, as a universal body, have not done a good job with building such unity in the midst of divisive decisions. Will Willimon tells a story of driving out to meet the lay leader of his very first pastorate out of seminary, a little one room church called "Friendship Methodist Church," which apparently didn't live up to its name. When he arrived, he found a big padlock and chain barring the front door. When the leader arrived, Will said, "I'm glad you could meet me to

open the lock on the door.” The leader responded, “Oh, that ain’t our lock. The sheriff put it there. Things got rough here at the meeting last month. Folks started yelling at one another, carting off furniture they had given to the church, making personal threats. So I called the sheriff and he came out and put that lock on until the new preacher could get here and settle ‘em down. Welcome, Preacher!” At that moment, I may have reconsidered my profession.

The author of our text today has conflict on his mind as well, a big church conflict which has arisen with 2 of the leaders. Paul is trying to redirect the church at Philippi’s thinking towards a beneficial compromise for all. Philippi was a center, a county seat if you will, for the imperial cult, a retirement community for veterans of the Roman army, and a city saturated in social hierarchies. Persons displayed worthiness by what they wore, where they were seated, the offices held, property and possessions acquired, and names chiseled on buildings or plaques. If Roman society in general had become the most status-symbol-conscious culture of the ancient world, no region east of Rome was more quintessentially Roman in this regard than the colony of Philippi. So Paul attempts to turn the tables much like Jesus did in his words that the last will be first and the first will be last. Paul appeals to the Philippians to mature and to grow; he reaches out to their common experience as Christian brothers and sisters. He points to the reality that access to power must be confined to those who aren’t in love with it, something we often get backwards. Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan indicate that much of what Paul writes is in direct defiance to the one who claimed to be in the form of God and who regarded “equality with God as something to be exploited,” that is the Roman emperor. Paul reminds his beloved church that it is not the emperor but Christ who is the Savior of the World, therefore ground their minds in what they see in Jesus, adjust their attitudes to match Christ’s

over the emperor's. He calls on their compassion, their sympathy, their sharing together, their working together, serving together, praising God together. Remember everything they have done in love and harmony and compassion. It sounds a bit like the phrase we are hearing from many different voices across the world in the face of COVID: "We are all going through this together – we will get through it together." Janet Hunt tells a story of a congregation who had been through 50 years of conflict and their dealings with one another had become downright abrasive. Hunt led them in an intensive study of our text today and the church decided to make a change. They took on a new focus of intentionally listening to each other and seeking to be more loving. About six months into this new mind-set, a woman and her mother started visiting the church. The woman spoke of the welcome they had received. She told about how they felt at home among these people. As she spoke, that same group that had been so mean to each other now had shining eyes and smiles that were literally turning to tears of gratitude and surprise. It is as Everett Dirksen once said, "The oil can is mightier than the sword."

Back when I was a Cowboys fan, some 30 years ago, I remember hearing a story about what Coach Jimmy Johnson told his players before leading them to the 1993 Super Bowl. He said, "I told them that if I laid a 2x4 across the floor, everybody there would walk across it and not fall, because our focus would be on walking the length of that board. But if I put the same board 10 stories high between 2 buildings, only a few would make it, because the focus would be on falling." Johnson told his players not to focus on the crowd, the media or the possibility of falling, but to focus on each play of the game as if it were a good practice session. The Cowboys won the game 52-7. Paul says it a bit differently as he reminds Christians not to focus on what people think, but to focus on maintaining the mindset of Christ, "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.”

I can hear the nay-sayers now – it won’t work! You’re supposed to protect what’s yours, don’t let anyone infringe on your rights, look out for yourself more than the team. To serve together and depend on others is what it means to be a loser. So when I see Paul, I guess that is what I will tell him – he’s a loser. But you know what Paul says at the very beginning of this text? He says that if the Philippians do these things, it would make his joy full. Well, look Paul, it is not your happiness we’re interested in; it’s our happiness. We have to deal with our own happiness. To which Paul redirects us back to Jesus as he gives us our earliest Christian hymn, a lyrical summary of the story of Jesus. Verses 6-11 encapsulate Paul’s most central convictions about 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.”

Fred Craddock shares a story about George Eliot, a woman author whose real name was Maryann Evans but had to use a man’s name to get her writing published. When her friend McCarthy died, George Eliot visited his grave to mourn. She was the only one that went. He belonged to her circle, she said. There were quite a number of friends about the same age who

hung out together, and McCarthy was a part of that group, but he was a little different from the others. George Eliot said that McCarthy was looking for a pearl of great price in a group of young people who were content with fake jewelry, as long as it was gaudy and attractive, popular and would shine out at parties. He was, she said, a most sensitive and caring person, and sometimes even at a social event, he was moved to tears by things that happened to people. McCarthy would talk to people and tell them they didn't have to buy friendship, they didn't need buy membership into the human race, you don't have to buy love. Just love and be a friend, that's all it takes. And everybody just kind of looked at him like he was strange. She said McCarthy would have given his life for people who would not give him the time of day. So none of his friends, except for George Eliot, showed up for his funeral." Craddock surmised, "Maybe McCarthy was a loser, but just think what could be done if we had a church full of losers just like McCarthy?" I wonder, just what are you thinking? "Let the same mind be in you that was in Jesus." Amen.