

Bridge Over Troubled Water

I can't help but think just how unsettling things seem to be. I look at social media, read the paper, watch the news and all I hear is unrest in the nation and world. I read about black against white; white against black, left against right, right against left, should we stand, should we kneel for our flag and national anthem, should we protest, should we abstain from watching. There have been horrific natural disasters; hurricanes with demonstrative devastation in Houston, Florida, Puerto Rico, and many other tropical islands, that we would call paradise. And the threat of nuclear war continually bombards us on the news.

Trust me, I am not up here to talk politics, preach doom and gloom, or judge one side from the other, but this is pretty troubling to see our community, our nation our world in such dissaray. Point fingers, and blaming one another does not solve the problems we face today, it only creates division. As we are constantly reminded of this turmoil, my anxiety level increases. I kind of want to turn off the TV, and get away from all the negativity.

President Lincoln, when he was in the midst of the Civil War stated: **A house divided cannot stand. We need stability, we need comfort, we need a safety net, we need to have each other's back, we need Christ. We need Christ in our life more than ever. Christ is our Bridge over Troubled water.**

Writer Max Lucado, at the beginning of his book, *Just Like Jesus*, makes this statement which I believe is important: "God loves you just the way you are," writes Lucado, "but he refuses to leave you that way. He wants you to be just like Jesus." Let me repeat this: "God loves you just the way you are, but he refuses to leave you that way. He wants you to be just like Jesus."

Sometimes, I believe, folks of today hear only the first of those words: "God loves you just the way you are . . ." and that suits us just fine. We want God to accept us just as we are . . . and then leave us alone. After all, it's uncomfortable to change. As long as God loves us just as we are, we've got it made. But I suspect Max Lucado is closer to the truth. Here is the whole Gospel: "God loves you just the way you are, but he refuses to leave you that way. He wants you to be just like Jesus."

This is St. Paul's message to the church at Philippi. Listen to his beautiful and profound words: "Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility **value others above yourselves**, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus . . ."

Paul is encouraging the church at Philippi to live in harmony and humility following the example of Christ. Be like Jesus, he is saying to them. Humble yourselves as he humbled himself, be a servant as he became a servant. “Have the same love . . . Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”

Note that St. Paul’s words are directed to a church. This characterizes a healthy church, we humble ourselves and serve one another.

That is the way a church ought to function. That’s the kind of church I hope we are trying to be.

I like something that Ronald L. Nickelson once wrote. “What is the quickest way to identify a great city?” he asked. “Almost everyone knows that Paris is the home of the Eiffel Tower. Rome has its Coliseum; London has Big Ben and the Tower Bridge; Moscow has the Kremlin. Around the world, many cities have landmarks by which they are recognized. Even small towns and villages often have unique features that give them a special identity. Lyons has its clock tower, on our neighboring church.

“Other cities are famous for what happens there. Los Angeles makes movies; New Orleans has Mardi Gras. Even if it is only Peppermint days, communities identify themselves in distinctive ways.”

Then Nickelson asks this question: “So what is it that identifies the Christian community (the church) as such? What is the landmark that makes us recognizable to the world? It is our loyalty to Christ, of course, but that is not all. Jesus himself said, ‘By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another’ (John 13:35). Therefore, [the] identifying landmark in the church is love.” (2)

What a beautiful statement about what the church is meant to be.

“Have the same love,” says St. Paul, “. . . Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”

A healthy church is one where people look out for one another. Simon and Garfunkel had a song back in the early seventies that has become a classic: “Like a Bridge Over Troubled Waters . . .”

As I sang earlier in the service the lyrics: “When you’re weary/ Feeling small/ When tears are in your eyes/ I will dry them all/ I’m on your side/ When times get rough/ And friends just can’t be found/ Like a bridge over troubled water/ I will lay me down . . .”

That’s how we should be in the church.

There is an interesting phrase that has entered our common vernacular in recent years. It is the phrase, “I’ll have your back.” If I say to someone, especially someone in a difficult situation, “I’ll have your back,” it means I’ll be there for you, look out for you, help you

out if you're in trouble.

The testimony of Scripture is that God always has our back and we are to have one another's back. Or, as in the Simon and Garfunkel analogy, God is our bridge over troubled water and we are to seek to be bridges for one another. This is the meaning of Christian community and this is how God judges churches. Our church may not be the largest in our city, we may never give an extraordinary amount to missions in comparison to larger, more affluent churches, but still we can be an extraordinary church if we will be there for one another, look out for one another, help out one another when we are in trouble. I look at our little church and realize it's value to our community of Lyons; with the Food Pantry, Clothing Ministry, Mission Work done by Michelle and her team, our music ministry lead by Camille, not to mention all the efforts by each person here today that help to keep our doors open, open in service to help those in need, to look out for one another. We got this. We got each other's back.

Another good analogy for the church is a flock of geese making its way across the sky. You're familiar with this analogy. It contains several elements:

As each goose flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the birds that follow. By flying in a V formation, the flock adds 71% extra flying range. In the same way church people who share a sense of community can help each other get where they are going more easily . . . because they are holding one another up.

We're told that when a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of flying alone. It quickly moves back to take advantage of the lifting power of the birds in front. If we are as wise as those geese we will also stay in formation with those headed where we want to go. We are willing to accept their help and give our help to others.

When the lead goose tires, it drops back in the formation and another flies to the point position. This is how the leadership of a church ought to work. We take turns doing the hard tasks. We respect and protect each other's unique arrangement of skills, capabilities, talents and resources.

The geese flying in formation honk to encourage those up front to keep up their speed. We do a lot of honking in the church. We need to make sure our honking is positive and encouraging. In churches where there is encouragement, production is much greater. Individual empowerment results from quality honking.

When a goose gets sick, two geese drop out of formation and follow it to help and protect it. They have this goose's back. They stand by each other in difficult times. (3)

A church family is to study the life of Jesus, says St. Paul, and "to have the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit," he writes. "Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."

The church ought to be willing to lay down its life in order to fulfill its mission.

Think this through for a few moments. Did you know that it's not our job to protect the church? So many churches are fixated on making sure the church survives. **Our task is not survival, but service.** So many churches have been unwilling to serve the least and the lowest because they might not mix well with their church family. They might soil our carpet and get stains on our lovely furniture. Some churches get to a crossroads in their church's life when a bold move of faith is called for, but they shrink back. Out of fear they think they must protect the church at all costs.

Listen to the rest of Paul's words in our lesson from Philippians: "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

To live like Jesus is to love and serve one another and to lay down our life for the world. This is to say that our mission is two-fold love one another and love the world for which Christ died.

Years ago Chuck Swindoll told about a very disturbing case that came before the courts in the state of Massachusetts back in the 1920s.

It concerned a man who had been walking along a pier when suddenly he tripped over a rope and fell into the cold, deep waters of that ocean bay. He came up sputtering, screaming for help, then sank beneath the surface. For some reason he was unable to swim or stay afloat.

His friends heard his faint cries in the distance, but they were too far away to rescue him. But within only a few yards was a young man lounging on a deck chair, sunbathing. Not only could the sunbather hear the drowning man plead, "Help, I can't swim," he was also an excellent swimmer.

But the tragedy is that he did nothing. He only turned his head to watch indifferently as the man finally sank and drowned.

The family of the victim was so upset by that display of extreme indifference, they sued the sunbather. The result? They lost the case. With a measure of reluctance, the court ruled that the man on the dock had no legal responsibility whatsoever to try to save the drowning man's life. (4)

There's a world of need outside the doors of this church. Nobody's going to sue us if we look away, ignore their need. Only God will know. But think what that means. **God will know.**

St. Paul was writing to the church when he said that we are to have the same mindset as Christ Jesus. Our job is not to protect the church but, as the church, to love and serve one another and be willing to lay down our life for those who are outside our doors. Love for one another, love for the world this is what it means to live like Jesus, and to keep our eyes focused on Jesus as our bridge over troubled water. Amen

1. Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001).
2. *The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, 2009-2010* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 2009), p. 277.
3. Adapted from: Teddi's Humor, teddi@alohabroadband.com.
4. Charles R. Swindoll, *Dropping Your Guard* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1983), p. 121.