

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

September 27, 2020, The 17th Sunday of Pentecost/The 26th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Psalm 78: 1-4, 12-16, Philippians 2:1-13

Shaped by the Songs of Faith

Intro to NT Letter to the Philippians, Reading 2:1-13

There are two things I want to point out about our reading this morning, before hearing it. The beginning of verse one reads: "If then there is any encouragement in Christ." In the way the original Greek was written, the people hearing this letter would have understood that Paul was saying: "If there is any encouragement in Christ...and there is." Or in English we might say "since there is encouragement in Christ." As you listen to these opening words Paul isn't questioning if these things exist, he is affirming that they do exist.

Secondly, verses 6-11 were the words of a hymn, sung in the church in Philippi, and probably in churches in other towns where Paul travelled. Paul is quoting words to the people in this letter, that would have been familiar to them, because they were part of their worshipping life together.

See Craddock, Fred, *Philippians, Interpretation Series*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Publishing, 1985, pp. 35-43

Are there hymns that are a part of your life, hymns touch your hearts?

Are there hymns that as soon as they start, they take you to another time and place?

Are there hymns that we sing together on Sunday mornings that always make you cry, no matter how much you try not to?

Are there hymns that make you think of certain people?

If I asked you to name some of your favorite old hymns what would you answer?

For me, hearing "*Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty*" reminds me of church as a child. When I was young the organ music felt like it filled my body up with church sounds. I felt at home among all those tall people who sang that hymn loudly from their hearts. I learned about faith watching them sing and hearing them sing. That hymn still feels like church to me.

I can rarely sing through the hymn "*Here I am Lord*" without crying, because it feels like someone wrote a hymn just for me to sing my commitment to giving my life to God. I learned that hymn in seminary and it has been with me throughout my years of ministry. It is a part of my statement of faith.

When we sing "*Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore*" I can hear this congregation, and the last one I served, belting out the chorus... "Oh Lord, with your eyes you have searched me..." I hear your faith when we sing that hymn.

And I think for many of us, "*Silent Night*" brings our memories right into this sanctuary, filled with candle light! That hymn feels like it gathers our hearts together outside that Bethlehem stable.

The songs of our faith have a lot of power:

to remind us of what we believe,
and Who we follow.

They often remind us of the people and churches who have helped shape us on the journey of faith.

The apostle Paul knew the power of hymns when he was writing to the Philippians. In the passage that we read this morning Paul is writing to a church that is arguing and quarreling among themselves. We don't know exactly why they are fighting among themselves.

But we know that the division among them is big enough that the word has reached Paul where he is in prison.

If you've ever in a church that's fighting among the members you know how devastating that can be.

For suggestions of possible reasons for "discord" see: Boring Eugene and Fred B. Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009, p. 617.1.4

A church disagreement or fight causes so much pain, whether the disagreement is about something inside the life of the church, or something going on in the world outside the church with which people don't agree. But can you imagine being remembered forever in Scripture as being the midst of that fight. In Philippians 4:2-3 Paul names two women who are in the middle of the middle of the disagreement. He writes: "*I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, to help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel.*"

I wonder if Euodia and Syntyche ever imagined when Paul's letter was read in their church the first time, that the letter would one day be part of scripture?

It's a strong reminder that what we do and say in church can become part of the church's oral history, and sometimes even its written history.

Paul is now away from this church in Philippi, in prison for his faith, and he wants to encourage them to heal what is broken between them. We don't know much about the argument except that it was damaging the church, and Euodia and Syntyche were heavily involved in the fight. So, Paul writes to them all, and he reminds them of the good that continues to happen in their church saying:

you have encouragement in Christ,
 you have the consolation, or comfort, of love,
 you share in the Holy Spirit together,
 you have compassion and sympathy for each other.

As one Bible teacher says: "Paul is reminding the Philippians of the reality in which they live as believers. Then, having reminded them who they are, he implores them to be themselves: v. 3."

He is calling them to be their best selves, as followers of Jesus.

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17 – Reign of Christ)*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2011, p. 113.1.2

He writes to them, and because this comes from our Scriptures, he is writing to us too, when he says: Because you are united by these things:
 our encouragement in Christ, our comfort of God's love, the Holy Spirit who lives in us, and the compassion and sympathy we have for each other,

Because you are united by these things, live out your faith together:

Don't do things based on selfish ambition

Don't be conceited with each other

Look at other people as better than yourselves.

Don't look at your own interests, but the interests of others.

After calling them to be themselves, a less wise teacher probably would have really jumped into the scolding these people of faith needed about hurting each other in the life of the church. But instead Paul does something completely different.

Paul quotes to them words that were part of their lives

because they had been singing them in church.

In a way Paul sings their faith to them.

He gives them words that are part of their hearts in the words of one of their hymns about who Jesus is.

“In Paul’s judgment, what the church needs is not a scolding but a reminder of the event that created and defined their life together...But Paul’s response even to pettiness was a big answer: a hymn, a creed, a confession of faith, a reminder of the central event that begets, nourishes, and matures the community of faith.”

Boring Eugene and Fred B. Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary*,
Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009, p. 618.1.0

He says the way to not be selfish or conceited, and to care more about others than yourself, is to live like Jesus. And in the words of our hymn:

Jesus was God

but he didn’t exploit that while he was on earth.

Instead he emptied himself of his Godly powers

and became like a servant, a slave,

who served humanity by living with us on earth to show us God’s love,

then he chose to die on the cross for us,

and to raise to new life for us,

to love and save us.

As I read these words from Philippians the image that comes to mind for me is of a large water pitcher. Jesus poured out the Godly power he’d had within him since before the beginning of time, to make room in his heart for all of us, so he could love and serve and save us.

He became a slave to humanity and all people, in all times and places.

He poured out himself for you and for me.

These words to the Philippians are words for us, because they invite us,

in our agreements and disagreements,

in our brokenness and our divisions

to live like Jesus did.

So, if we think of that large water pitcher again, and imagine it is us, then I believe that we are called to empty our selves too.

We are called to empty our selves of our selfishness and conceit and those things that prevent us from learning to look at other people’s interests and lives as more important than our own.

The words to the Philippians are words for all of us:

We have encouragement in Christ,

We have the consolation and comfort of God’s love,

We share in the Holy Spirit together,

We have compassion and sympathy for each other.

Because we are united by these things, let us live out our faith together:

So we don’t do things based on selfish ambition

Sp we aren’t conceited with each other

So we look at other people as better than ourselves.

And we don’t look at your own interests, but the interests of others.

Euodia and Syntyche were filled up with Euodia and Syntyche. They were filled up with the quarrel in the church and that fight was damaging the church. They were filled up with themselves.

There wasn't room for love in their lives.

There wasn't room to think of others as more important than themselves.

We as followers of Jesus are called to pour our selves out of the way, so that the love of Jesus is what fills us up and there is plenty of room for other people in our lives.

So, what are the hymns that will remind you of who you are as a child of God? What are the hymns of the faith that can help you see in this 2020 world we are living in?

In a time of trouble and division Paul sang the faith to the people.

What songs of the faith can you sing to yourself,
for the sake of the family of faith
and the life of faith we are called to give away these divided days?

I encourage you today, and in the week ahead, to pick up your hymnal, find that old CD you love, download or stream your favorite songs of the faith,

and let them sing God's inclusive, uniting love into your heart.

Let them sing you into being your self, your God-created, God-imagined self.

Let us sing ourselves to the place where we can be ourselves, empty pitchers, filling up with the love of Christ, pouring that love out to others.

Because that's the path Jesus shows us, and that we follow.

May the hymns of faith we choose echo the words of that good old hymn from the 1st century:
Therefore, God also highly exalted Jesus
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.