

“One In Christ”
 Philippians 4:1-9
 Matthew 5:43-48

Rev. Dorothy L. Johns
 January 24, 2010 EH

Hear these readings from God’s Holy Word from The Message Bible:

Philippians 4:1-9 ¹ My dear, dear friends! I love you so much. I do want the very best for you. You make me feel such joy, fill me with such pride. Don't waver. Stay on track, steady in God. ²I urge Euodia and Syntyche to iron out their differences and make up. God doesn't want his children holding grudges. ³And, oh, yes, Syzygus, since you're right there to help them work things out, do your best with them. These women worked for the Message hand in hand with Clement and me, and with the other veterans—worked as hard as any of us. Remember, their names are also in the Book of Life. ⁴⁻⁵Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in him! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them. Help them see that the Master is about to arrive. He could show up any minute!

⁶⁻⁷Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life. ⁸⁻⁹Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies.

Matthew 5:43-48 ⁴³⁻⁴⁷"You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that. ⁴⁸"In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you."

I am so very glad to see you all here this morning. The topic of today’s message is a very important one for all Christians, but it is especially important for us, now, here today in this church.

You and I are connected in covenant and relationship with one another through Jesus Christ. Our connection with the Father affects and governs our relationships with each other, and our relationships with each other affect our relationship with God.

It is so important that you and I have a right relationship with each other that Jesus said in Matthew 5:23-25 “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”

In fact, the last thing that Jesus prayed for His church was that the Father would make us one as Jesus is one with the Father!

When I came here 6 months ago, this church was in trouble. But none of us talked about it.

The church had gotten to the point where it couldn't afford the Pastor's salary, so a change in Pastor needed to be made.

Well the truth is, changes aren't easy. They require giving something up and doing what we might not want to do, or doing things different than we have before.

All of us here were faced with that fact, and it wasn't easy.

This church had to give up the pastor that you had for 21 years.

I had to move away from the community that I was born and raised in, leave my church, and leave all my friends, family and comforts that I've ever had, to go to an unknown place.

That alone was hard enough for all of us, but then the unfathomable happened when Joe DiGangi unexpectedly passed away.

I'd met Joe a couple of times, and could tell that he was what they call, the Patriarch of the church. I knew in my heart that if I could win him over, that things would go smoothly in our transition. I hoped and prayed for that.

And I believe that the people of this church, were looking to Joe to help to understand what was going on, and to help you embrace the change that was inevitable, as well as this new person who had come.

But that all changed - and things became difficult and strained.

Instead of dealing with the problems at hand,
we all allowed insignificant and trivial things to take up our time.

Instead of working together to fix the things that needed to be fixed, we became so busy looking at ourselves, that we haven't been looking at who we are as a church, and Whose we are.

In the meantime, attendance dropped even more and giving has dropped to the point where the word "struggling" is an understatement.

The leadership of the church met this past week and looked at the realities of where we are right now. And it wasn't good.

It was a very solemn time – as we looked at, and discussed our options.

But I believe that – as hard as that was, that had to happen.
We finally had to put the trivial things aside and took a good hard look at our church and at ourselves.

It's no secret that this church has had conflicts in the past.
We've had conflicts in the present.
And surely we'll have conflicts in the future.

The reality is that we are human beings, and we will do things and say things that hurt other people.

And most times, the things that we do and say have nothing to do with the real issue at hand, or what we really feel.

Conflict is the cause of so much of the pain that exists or has existed in this world. And it usually comes about for two reasons – you have something I want and you won't give it to me – or you have offended me and I feel that I must do something about it.

Conflict takes up our energy and keeps us from doing other things. Imagine how much we could do if we dealt with conflict and then moved on to do God's work.

The truth of the matter is that relationships can be strengthened through conflict- **IF** we handle them correctly.

What makes or breaks relationships, and what makes or breaks churches, is what they choose to do in conflict.

As I drove up to the office of our District Superintendent on Thursday morning to discuss our situation, I kept thinking about all of the unchurched people of this area that our church serves.

I kept thinking about how this area is truly a mission field with so many souls that need to see and hear God's love.

Rev. Smith and I discussed our options- and in spite of the problems, we were hopeful and excited about the ministry that we are- and the ministry that we can be, and how there is so much ahead of us.

The truth is though, that we can't even hope to do any of it if we are not reconciled people.

How can we be united in Christ, if we are divided in the church?

If we can't do that, then we aren't really a church anyway, and what would be the point.

In our reading from Philippians, Paul pleaded with Euodia and with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord, because God's common call on our lives is far greater than any disagreement we may have.

Paul says to both of them, I want you to be reconciled together. He is not concerned who was the first one to do something offensive.

His concern was that these two Christians be reconciled in Christ. Paul loved the church and he knew that the vitality and mission of that church was in jeopardy.

Their conflict had the potential to spread and divide the whole church.

He reminded them that they are on the same team, and to make sure that eternal allies don't treat each other like earthly enemies.

We need to always remember that we are on the same team even when we disagree.

If we ever get to the point of disagreement where we feel that we have to win and the other has to lose, then we have confused our ally with the enemy.

The true Enemy will then come in and destroy us and our church!

As I look around this room, I see persons who are beautiful, caring, and loving people- who truly and genuinely love the Lord.

People who have heard God's call and have turned to Him. People who have come together in this place.

Our strength lies in the strength of our people and in our love for God and therefore our love for each other.

No matter how things might look right now, God can turn them around, if we look to Him, and look to love.

As long as we are on this side of heaven, people will do things that may be unreasonable, or may even be hurtful. But each one of us can choose how we will respond.

We can choose to listen for the true feelings and message, and to work through the situation.

We can choose to 'see the God' that is in the other person, especially when we disagree.

It's amazing how if you do that, how the other things seem to melt away.

There is so much ministry to share and so much to do- there really is no time for disagreements.

I'd like to share a personal story of a situation that happened on my previous church.

I'd only been there about 6 months or so, when I received a phone call from a woman whom I didn't know -who called asking for money. She'd said she attended our church in the past and had moved away and now was back in town and needed money to pay her rent.

Our church didn't have funds like that to give out, but I gave her phone numbers of nearby agencies that I thought might possibly be able to help. I shared that we could help her out with food, or other needs and gave her a warm invitation to our community of faith.

As a pastor, it is not uncommon to receive calls from persons who really don't want any other help, but often just call all around to the surrounding churches looking for money. In those first 6 months there, I had gotten many calls - as well as visits from people, who would actually turn down food when it was offered when they realized that there was no money to be given.

I expected that she would stop in, but I never heard from her until a little more than a year later, when I received a very long and a nasty handwritten letter from this woman- berating me for not helping her when she had called. She included a small slip of paper that she'd cut out from our most recent newsletter, which was on the topic of Stewardship.

She didn't even know me, but made some very mean and nasty comments about me, even calling me horrible names and asked to be removed from any further church correspondence.

I was shocked and totally surprised.

I knew that when we had spoken, I'd offered to help her in whatever ways that I and the church could- and knew that the loving people of the church would indeed do everything in their power to help.

We'd just rallied around another family who was in need - whom I'd just given an extra bedroom set to- that I had.

I knew her words were unreasonable, but still it hurt deeply, and even made me angry.

I tried to figure out who she might be- you know how in a small town and church everyone is connected to everyone else in some way, but couldn't. No one seemed to know who she was.

I tucked the letter aside and would pull it out and read it again, and again for some time, before deciding that I had to respond to it. It truly bothered me to think that as a Pastor, that I had not seen someone's need and had made them that mad. Pastors are supposed to nurture and heal. And apparently I hadn't done that for her. And that hurt very much.

I tried to put my anger and frustration aside, and see between her words to the pain that she must have been feeling, to have written such things. I decided the only thing that I could do was to try to reach out to her and apologize.

Several phone calls went unanswered, so I decided to take a risk and write her a letter.

It couldn't hurt. The worst she could do is throw it away. But at least I'd know that I'd tried to reach out to her.

I apologized in my letter for not being there for her in her time of need. I asked her forgiveness and asked if she would please call me so we could talk.

Well she didn't.

I decided that she must have just wanted to blow off steam, and that there wasn't any more I could do, so I decided that I had to just let it go.

I was quite surprised about a year and a half later when what I thought was a visitor to the church, turned out to be her.

She introduced herself after the service and said she was so glad to be there and that my message was wonderful, just what she needed to hear. She didn't mention her letter, and neither did I.

She came back again and again and became a regular attender at the church for nine months- when it was announced that I would be leaving to be appointed here.

She told me on the day that I left - that she was so sorry that she didn't have the chance to get to know me sooner.

She actually called me about a month ago to apologize for her words and how she regrets so deeply the time that she lost because she had held onto that anger.

...Anger that keep her away from the church and from the relationship that we might have had.

I share this because it is so very sad to miss out on opportunities for worship and fellowship, over unresolved hurts and anger.

Again, I share Mathew 5:23-25 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

You know that God has forgiven you of so much,
Much more than you could ever forgive someone else.

It may mean humbling yourself to go to another person. It may be you have wronged them or they have wronged you, but according to this passage, in either case seek agreement.

Seeking reconciliation from others will prevent you from having bitterness and resentment in your life that can keep you from a proper relationship with the Lord.

Let each of us ask the Lord in a prayerful way - if there is someone that you need to seek agreement with in the Lord,

because this kind of reconciliation is vital for your walk with God and for our church.

There is so much work to do for the Kingdom – that there is no time to waste on being angry, or for being apart from the body of Christ.

We need to find God's vision for this church and put ourselves aside and work together, so God can work through us.

We as the church can model Christ's love to our community and to the world –
And when we do, what a powerful witness and testimony we will be!

