



Sunday September 27, 2020
Matthew 21:23-32 and Philippians 2:1-13
(Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Pastor Tony Acompanado

Teamwork Makes the Dream Work

I'd like to tell you a story about four people: Everybody, Somebody, Anybody and Nobody. There was an important job to be done and Everybody was asked to do it. Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did. Somebody got angry about that because it was Everybody's job. Everybody knew that Anybody could do it, but Nobody realized that Somebody wouldn't do it. And it ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody because Nobody did what Anybody could have done. What's the moral of the story here? Each one looked to their own interests and as a result there was no unity, and therefore they also weren't as productive, effective, or connected as they could have been.

In our reading today from Philippians, we find Paul, who is sitting in prison, writing an appeal to the church in Philippi, and he's writing them to counsel them on the rumors he's received of the division taking place in their community. His appeal centers around communal unity and individual humility – both whose purpose is to guide them in a pattern of thinking and living – one grounded in the way of Jesus. For Paul, humility is a necessary ingredient for unity, and true humility is measured by self-sacrifice and tangible concern for others.

The complimentary nature of these two virtues raises an important question for us today who live in a predominantly individualistic society. And if humility and unity complement one another, then does a lack of focus on intentional community imply a lack of true humility? For Paul, the answer is yes, because how we think profoundly influences how we live.

If we were to make a list of virtues that we strive for and value these days, I imagine the list would probably look something like this: self-discipline, responsibility, work, perseverance, loyalty, courage, faith, honesty, compassion and friendship. All wonderful things in their own right, but I wonder if *humility* would even make the list. I mean let's face it, do we really look for humility in our leaders? Do we list humility as a character trait on our resumes? And if you did claim to be humble, would it be considered bragging?

But I do think there are times in our lives when we grasp how vital unity is. It may be during a meal with friends, or at a family gathering when we see all who are present conversing and happy to be in one another's company. Past differences or misunderstandings may not have totally disappeared, but they lose their strength and importance as the bonds of shared affection are celebrated. Such experiences are privileged moments, when unity becomes a living reality – and we realize once and for all that it is a gift, one which we in fact desire deeply and which gives us immense joy.

The bottom line is, if we're going to live together as the community of God, then we're going to have to learn some humility. As the Body of Christ, we are encouraged toward humility, obedience, and self-giving love – the type demonstrated by Jesus. They are expressions of faith and trust in the gracious and loving character of God. In Paul's letter to the church in Philippi he gets right to what's really bothering him – Disunity. Essentially, he comes out and says, "PLEASE! Think as one, love as one, be united and in agreement. Don't do anything out of selfishness or overinflated self-importance. Instead of looking out for number one, watch out and act first for the good of others.

My friends, especially in these days of the pandemic and amidst the pervasive division taking place throughout our world, this appeal from Paul seems to be more appropriate than ever. I'm not sure that I can say in my 46 years of life that I've ever known a more divided and polarized America. But this isn't solely an American problem either, rather it's a global issue whose impact spans across the generations. And just to be clear, we



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aren't unique in this either – in fact I'd say that at least a third of the New Testament deals with division and polarization.

But hey, if we're talking about unity and being honest about it, then we also have to admit that too often our version of "unity" has looked like dissenting voices needing to be suppressed, disagreement being glossed over and dissidents being encouraged to just fade away quietly. "Unity" cannot simply be a matter of *"Shut up and go along with the majority!"*

So how do we do what Paul is asking us to do? Well, I think we have to look at the instructions Paul offers. He says, that we are to have the same mind and the same love as Jesus. Today we hear about Christ's humility which is grounded in humbling himself to the point of death by crucifixion. This movement by Christ is the heartbeat of what Paul is trying to get at. If we want to become like Christ, then we have to begin by first recognizing what Christ did so that we might orient our lives around him. Christ is not merely an example, rather he is the very embodiment of God's will and work for humanity, and so deservedly he should be the object of our devotion.

In our culture today, we are generally trained from early on that life is all about ME, MINE, and MY WAY. Even our religion can get distorted when it's based on MY RELATIONSHIP with God, or MY BELIEFS. But what would our relationships with one another and with God look like, and how might a unified global community look if we changed the ME, MINE, and MY WAY – to WE, OURS, and GOD'S WAYS? The Good News for us all is that God promises that we don't have to do this alone. God is with us, working in and through us, enabling us both to will and work for the unity of the world and to the great glory of God, and for this we say, thanks be to God. Amen.