

September 20, 2009
Pentecost 16
Philippians Sermon Series

“Working Together with Other Christians”

PHILIPPIANS 4:2-5

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. ³ Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life. ⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

Have you ever been to a wedding where the bride and groom got into a nasty fight at their wedding reception? A few years ago this article appeared in the Los Angeles Times. “At the Blue Dolphin Restaurant in San Leandro, 300 guests assembled for a wedding reception. As they chattered happily among themselves, they suddenly grew silent when the newly weds began arguing in loud voices. Dismay turned to disbelief when the groom grabbed the wedding cake and threw it into the bride’s face. By the time the police squad pulled up, the guests were breaking chairs and smashing mirrors. It took half an hour for thirty police to get the crowd under control, and by that time the newly weds had disappeared.”

Have you ever heard of a Christian congregation where some of the people did not get along with each other? Paul, the prisoner in Rome, speaks about his dear Christian friends in Philippi as his joy and his crown. Because he loves and cares so much about these people he pleads with two women to learn to get along with each other as sisters in Christ. Their names were Euodia and Syntyche. We don’t know why they were having a hissy fit with each other, but we do know that it grieved Paul enough that he writes about this problem in this important letter.

Someone once said “There are no perfect marriages, but only successful marriages.” The same could be said of Christian congregations. There are no perfect gatherings of people around the Word and the Sacraments, but there are successful gatherings where Christians learn to put into practice what Paul speaks about in these words before us. This morning we want to speak to you about “Working Together with Other Christians.” We will get along with each other if we celebrate the unique harmony we share in Christ and the unique joy we share in Christ.

We have a unique harmony

Paul pleads with Euodia and Syntyche to get along with one another. “I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord.” Picture in your mind the Christians in Philippi receiving the news that a letter has arrived from the Apostle Paul who was a prisoner in Rome. The congregation gathers together, and one of the elders stands up and reads these words from Paul. They listen in rapt attention and with tears in their eyes as Paul describes how the Lord had used his chains as an opportunity to reach Caesar’s vaunted Roman guard with the message of the gospel. They listen to him

as encourages them to have the mind of Jesus as they learn to serve each other in love. They listen carefully as he tells them of the joy of having a righteousness in Christ that is a totally free gift. They thrill to his words about looking forward to a resurrection of their bodies on the last day. They love it when he describes them as his "joy and crown." Then the letter broaches something very personal, the sad rift between the two beloved sisters Euodia and Syntyche.

Did these two women who were not getting along hear these words as they were being read for the first time? Let's assume that they did. You see Euodia sitting over there in her favorite spot in the congregation as far away from Syntyche as she can possibly be. And there is Syntyche sitting as far away from Euodia as possible. Everyone in the congregation is heart broken that these women cannot get over their conflict and hard feelings. Why can't they get on the same page in their mutual love for Jesus and the blessing of serving in his kingdom. Can't you see these two women hanging their heads in godly shame and shedding tears as their beloved Apostle Paul pleads with them to agree with each other in the Lord?

We aren't told what the conflict was. If it was doctrine Paul would have encouraged them to stay faithful to the Word of the Lord that he had given to them. It was probably something petty, or something foolish. It was one of those "She said this. No, she said that." Do you remember when your children were smaller how they would get into a fight over something small and insignificant? Has this ever happened in your marriage? Could this happen in our congregation? Sure it can.

Some of you have heard the story of a WELS congregation in California that was dedicating its new church building because the congregation was growing and reaching out to new people. When it came to serving the meal after the dedication, the committee in charge of the meal got into a conflict over what relishes to put on the relish trays. Before you even begin to laugh at this foolishness, or shake your head in disgust, just think of the times we have had conflicts with people over something just as foolish and unimportant. Martin Luther said that wherever the Lord builds his church, the devil builds his chapel next door. If he cannot attack dear Christians such as Euodia and Syntyche with false teaching he will attack them by creating conflict in their lives often over issues that are totally insignificant.

Understand my dear Christians that these two women were solid, good workers for the Lord, who were trapped in the sin of not getting along with each other. Listen more to what Paul writes about them. "Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life." He calls them women who "contended at my side in the cause of the gospel." The Greek word for "contend" is the same word that forms the basis of our word "athlete." Good athletes are able to push themselves to compete at a higher level. Good athletes also know how to work together with their teammates to win the athletic contest. Paul had a very high regard for these women who were real athletes for the cross of Jesus. How sad that they were not getting along, and they were dragging other members down with them.

Who is this loyal yokefellow Paul asks to help them with their rift? Most likely it was the man mentioned earlier in this letter, that dear friend and co-worker, much loved by the congregation, a man whose name was Epaphroditus. It was Epaphroditus who took the

letter of Paul back to the people of Philippi. This trusted companion had almost died helping Paul. He is the man Paul asks to help with this problem of not getting along.

The key to getting along is to celebrate the unique harmony and closeness that we have together in Jesus. Paul asks them to "agree with each other in the Lord." He wants them to be on the same page together in the Lord. Paul has talked about having the same mind in chapter two when he wrote, "then make my joy complete by being like-minded, have the same love, being one in spirit and purpose." This same mind is the mind or attitude which Jesus had when he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on the cross. Just as Jesus died to himself to save us, he asks us to die to ourselves when it comes to getting along with other people.

Maybe I can illustrate this by holding up my two arms in the air. When you are having a conflict with someone you hold your ground and do not want to give. (Hold arms up) However, when one person begins to die to himself as Jesus said we should do, then the other person soon finds strength to do the same. (Have one arm go down and then the other.)

I can recall having conflicts with my brothers and sister when growing up. I also remember my dad telling us, "Who will be the first to say 'I am sorry?'" We were Christian children who knew the mind of Christ. We sat up in front every Sunday in worship and saw the statue of the ascended Lord Jesus, with the nail prints in his hands. My father's words could well have been "Who will be the first to have the mind of Jesus?"

We have a unique joy

Conflicts in the family of Christ will vanish into thin air when celebrate together the unique joy we have in Jesus. Paul talks about celebrating "along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life." Look at the person sitting next to you, or in front of you, or behind you. That person who confesses faith in Jesus has their name written in the book of life. Remember the time when Jesus sent 70 of his disciples to do mission work. They came back so excited and thrilled to see demons cast out in the name of Jesus. Luke 10:17 says, "The seventy-two returned with joy and said, 'Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.'" Jesus then calmly said, "However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." Whether we are going through the highest moments of life, or the lowest, or even when we have conflict we can always rejoice because our names are written in the book of life. We can say to each other in times of trouble and conflict, "In the light of eternity does it really matter?"

And then there is the added unique joy we have as believers who are eagerly looking forward to Jesus return. During the third Sunday in Advent we light the pink candle, the candle of joy, and we hear these words read from Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near." Every day of life on this earth is a day to light a candle of joy and remind each other to rejoice because the Lord could return at any time. How can we not be gentle and kind to all if we know that at any moment the heavens will open and Jesus will come again to take us home to the place he has prepared for us?

Have you ever been to a wedding celebration where the bride and groom got into a nasty fight? I have. It happened when I was a child and we attended the wedding of my dad's godchild, his cousin's son. I recall driving home and hearing my dad say to my mom with sadness in his voice,

“That marriage won’t last long.” But the Lord had other plans. A few years ago I asked my dad about that childhood memory. He told me how they were not only still married, but were faithful in worship. The Jesus who paid the price to spare us from the eternal death we deserve is the same Jesus who helps us with our conflicts in our homes, and also in our congregations. Amen.