

Same Mind, Same Love, Same Joy

Philippians 1:1-2

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As many of us get ready for school to start, although we try with a positive attitude to make the best of it, we don't have to pretend that it isn't difficult, especially for families with teenagers that might be tense from being stuck at home, or parents of toddlers who need constant attention even during working hours. Lament psalms show us it's okay to acknowledge difficulties. And it's in these times that the book of Philippians comes alive for us, because Paul wrote this letter as he too was experiencing difficulty. And he tells us that we must first have a change of mind, which leads to Christian love and in the end to Christian joy. Throughout Philippians he says to "think this way," because we all must realize that we don't think as clearly as we think we do, and that God wants to change how we think.

Even from the opening of Paul's letter we see how he wants us to change our thinking (1:1-2). Unlike letters today, ancient letters began with the writer followed by the recipient. But the opening of Philippians is unusual when we compare it with the openings of Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, and Ephesians, all of which include Paul's title as an apostle, called by Jesus Christ directly. Mentioning one's title in the greeting ensures the readers will pay attention because the instruction comes from a position of authority. But in Philippians, Paul instead starts by mentioning himself as well as Timothy, even though Paul was the one who wrote the letter. Furthermore, rather than mentioning his title as an apostle, he calls himself, along with Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus. Also, rather unusually, in his address Paul gives a shout out to the overseers and deacons after mentioning the saints.

As mentioned earlier, Paul is trying to change the way we think. And in this opening, he's trying to teach us a lesson that relationships in church shouldn't be based on authority, position, and status; but rather they should be based on humility. Our culture, which tells us to respect elders, creates an undesirable emphasis on hierarchy. Perhaps the Philippians also had issues with making hierarchy too important in their relationships. So Paul de-emphasizes hierarchy here. He groups himself with Timothy as servants, even though Paul is an apostle and Timothy isn't. Humility is more important than authority. Paul elaborates on this humility in chapter 2, where he tells us to imitate Jesus in His humility, with which He gave up His position in heaven to come to earth and even to die for all of us. This isn't the false humility that our

culture often produces. We can see the nature of this humility also in Numbers 12:3, where Moses writes that he was the most humble man on the earth. Though this sounds ironic or contradictory, it was true because only Moses had talked to God face to face. By staring at the glory of God, he more than anyone else realized his own insignificance. Paul likewise was humbled by seeing Jesus on the road to Damascus, and made himself a lowly servant of Christ. Closer to home, our own Pastor Richard is an excellent example of humility, whom I strive to emulate. When he was ordained he told us not to call him by his title because he knew that in relationships humility is more important than authority and hierarchy. Humility is critical to experiencing Christian joy.

Philippians 2:3 describes this humility as considering others as more important than yourself. Without humility, we can be rude and unloving. This is why in deacons committee we tell the deacons to always assume others' good intent, otherwise we may become impatient and insensitive. I'm thankful that our church isn't that critical. However, especially during this pandemic, when we are trying to put together services virtually, while not being professionals, we make mistakes from time to time. And it's okay to bring up things that could be improved, but when you bring up these things, please do it with a sense of humility, considering others in your expression and tone, rather than being harsh or critical about it. Humility has to be the basis of our church relationships and interactions.

Although Paul de-emphasizes hierarchy, he unusually includes a shout-out to the overseers (leaders in the ministry of the word of God) and deacons (leaders in the ministry of works). He puts them after all the saints, so as not to elevate them above others. However he still mentions them because he wants to acknowledge that there are those who are called to serve in leadership positions, and we must be considerate of those who have this weighty responsibility. Although 1 Corinthians 12 tells us that all members are equally important in their various roles, those in leadership make decisions that can affect the whole church in ways that others might not. Therefore we should support and pray for them. Members of our pastoral council, deacons committee, medical advisory team, and church regathering committee, all make important decisions to serve you all, sometimes in anonymity. So let us recognize their weighty responsibility and support them in this. But at the same time, let all of us maintain humility, in whatever position we are in, as the foundation of our relationships, so that we may have Christian love and joy.