

Sermon: Together we can
17 Pentecost, Year A
Philippians 2:1-13

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Emmanuel Church, Staunton
October 1, 2017

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

Do you sometimes wonder why you come to church on Sundays? Why you get out of bed, leave the comforts of home behind and come to this place to gather with these people? What is it you are here to do or to be? Well, each of us probably comes for a variety of reasons that may include: because my parents made me! Or to make my spouse or partner happy! Or it just seems the right thing to do. Or maybe it is because you feel great affection for the people of this parish and want to be with them. Maybe if truth be told you aren't really sure why you come to church. Your reasons for coming may change over time. What I believe draws most of us here, even when we don't articulate it, is the desire to draw near to God in community with others, the yearning within to connect with the Divine, to be more aware of the Holy.

In the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians, he eagerly and affectionately encourages the faith community, also known as the church of course, to be Christ-like. In today's reading, Paul gives us a great gift of how to go about being Christ-like. He writes, “make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” In the ancient Mediterranean world it was not unusual to speak of love as better than hate, harmony better than discord. But humility was seen as a weakness, so this exhortation toward humility was radical. Paul points to Christ's own humility – Christ emptying himself allowed him to willingly go to the cross. This humility resulted in his being exalted by God so that every knee should bend at Jesus' name.

So we could say that our natural response to Jesus' life, death and resurrection is to worship God. In the biblical vision God is both knowable and unknowable - a deep mystery. Writer Christopher Webber says, “Worship is the response of the created and limited human mind and heart to the unlimited Creator, who is sensed but never fully known. Worship is a response to beauty, to love, to human need, to our deepest fears, to our greatest joys.”ⁱ

Sometimes in the Episcopal Church we say that our Sunday worship is the springboard for life. In other words, our Sunday worship is not intended to be a segregated part of our week or isolated part of our being but something that is integrated into our week and incorporated into our being. It is a gift that teaches us how to live all the time. The word “liturgy” comes from the Greek, meaning “public works.” Now for some of us here who work for local governments, “public works” conjures up images of people doing garbage collection, street cleaning, fixing water pipes and sewer lines, and while that is certainly godly work, in this context we are really talking about the work of all the people of the church, the *participation* of everyone who gathers together for worship.

When we pray together through the liturgy we are participating in an ancient stream of worship, over two thousand years old for us Christians, that is based on Jewish liturgies even older than that. Think about it – when we pray together in this fashion we are joining the voices of others in

the room but also all around the world, today and beyond time. We join all the saints in ages past. Our prayers point to a deep connection to the living and the dead through God. These common prayers have withstood the test of time. What a joy and privilege to enter this mystery that points us all to God.

You may have noticed that to enter an Episcopal worship service requires what some have called “pew aerobics”! We sit, stand, kneel – all for specific reasons. We are very *incarnational* in our beliefs about God. Jesus came to us in human form, in the flesh, and how we worship with our bodies is reflective of what we believe about God. So we “get physical”. To stand in prayer is the most ancient posture of prayer. It echoes the posture of the resurrection and can reflect praise or thanksgiving. To kneel denotes humility or contrition for sin or honoring the authority of God. To sit indicates a readiness or willingness to learn. One position rarely experienced is the body flat on the ground face down – prostrate – that indicates a full submission to God. Sometimes we see this at the ordinations of priests, monks and nuns. (Maybe we need to assume that full bodied groundedness more often!)

Our service opens with a hymn of praise; we praise God not because God *needs* our praise but because *we* need to praise God; it is a natural response to the holiness of God. Then we move through the Liturgy of the Word, where we listen to Scripture, then hear a sermon, which is a response to Scripture, then stand for the Nicene Creed which is over 1600 years old and Prayers of the People. For most of us, the Prayers of the People wake us up to the needs and concerns that we might not otherwise be aware of. The confession allows us to be alert to our sin, our mistakes, things we have done or have neglected to do that have distanced us from God and from other people. In the Confession and Absolution, we open ourselves to God’s mercy, which, if we are willing to receive it, relieves us from the burden of guilt and sorrow we carry, thereby allowing us the wholeness and freedom God desires for us. The Peace naturally follows and gives us an opportunity, having been reconciled, to connect with those around us.

Moving then to the Liturgy of the Table, we focus on the Eucharist. Eucharist is the Greek word for Thanksgiving. In this Eucharistic Prayer we remember what God has done for us and our response is to be thankful. The bread and wine represent the work of the people amidst the body of Christ. When the bread is broken we remember Christ’s body, broken for us. In this paradox, we offer our own brokenness as we accept Christ’s gift of wholeness. We experience a connection with God and a completeness that comes with this encounter with the Holy. When we receive the bread and wine, Christ comes into our lives and changes our hearts.

When you are tempted to skip church, remember that while you may think you don’t need us, maybe we need you to be complete! We find our unity through our common worship. We don’t all believe the exact same things, nor do we have to. But we can find our unity in Jesus Christ, as we worship him together – as we respond to beauty, to love, to human need, to our deepest fears, to our greatest joys. As we carry on this ancient tradition of liturgy, we may find ourselves better reflecting the love of the living God in ever new ways throughout our week.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” Amen.

ⁱ Webber, Christopher, Welcome to the Episcopal Church, p.25