

Waiting With Wonder | Life In the Spirit

“The Fellowship of the Spirit”

2 Corinthians 13.11ff; Philippians 2.1-13

5.10.20

Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. ¹²Greet one another with a holy kiss. ¹³All the saints greet you. ¹⁴The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.

(Philippians 2) Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, ² make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. ³Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴ do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. ⁵ Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. ⁸ Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. ¹² So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

Usually the sermons, during this part of the year (after Easter) are devoted to the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. We're moving toward the celebration of the Holy Spirit on the third great Christian Holy Day – the Day of Pentecost (May 31).

Last week, we looked at LIVING by the Spirit in that new rule or practice of life that He animates and energizes, a life lived not just because “I HAVE to” but because “it’s my true nature...and I WANT to”: the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Rom 8.2)

And this week we look at the Holy Spirit’s place in the alternative society He’s bringing to life all over the world, a City within the city – the Church.

And as we think of the Spirit working in the Body of Christ (the Church) we're again reminded that what God is doing in the world is much more than a kind of private experience given to so many isolated and separated persons like islands – but He's building a community, a fellowship of the Spirit (as it says in both these texts).

We're also reminded that IN our day... in these strange times these are strange words and difficult to understand BECAUSE...for years ...decades...the trend in our society has been NOT in the direction of community and togetherness but instead in the direction of the private, the individual, the personal, the separated, the isolated and the alone.

So, today we look at how the gospel counteracts that trend and how the Church stands as a true alternative to a fragmented society full of isolated individuals. What does Christianity demand of the believer in terms of a shared life? And how would those demands, if actually met, how would that offer a refreshing alternative to our (SFL) individualism?

Let's look at, the Fellowship of the Spirit:

- 1) Extreme Demands
- 2) Extravagant Resources
- 3) Excellent Moment (to USE those resources)

The trend in our own culture is really not a new one. When Alexis de Tocqueville (*Democracy In America*, 1840) came in the early 1800s from France (disillusioned that the French Revolution wasn't delivering what it had promised) and after studying American democracy he came away with a profound respect for this country but he also saw some seeds of our own undoing. He wondered about the tyranny of the majority AND he questioned our individualism. Then...fast forward to when those seeds began to yield fruit.

In 1985 a group of sociologists from UC Berkley, led by Robert Bellah published a study called *Habits of the Heart - Individualism and Commitment in American Life* and that team warned that some of de Tocqueville's prophecies were coming to pass.

Robert Bellah gave a name to the prevailing ethical, social outlook in post '60s America: "Expressive Individualism". Others called it "the duty to self ethic" i.e. I'm not only allowed to be a little selfish but I am obligated first to my self.

And in 2000, a Harvard Political scientist, Robert Putnam wrote a book in this same vein titled, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Putnam said many traditional civic, social and fraternal organizations — like bowling leagues — have had a massive decline in membership... More people are bowling than ever before but NOT together in leagues... bowling alone.

And all this is to say: the recovery of community in our time and place is really an uphill climb! (It may require some sort of national or even international crisis... like a health crisis... who knows?) And when... you look at what the Apostles had in mind... it looks radical...to OUR eyes it looks unreasonable/extreme!

Writing at the very end of a long and very difficult letter in which the Apostle Paul had to say a lot of relationally tough things – he'd been a pastor to this church and they turned on him and really betrayed him... And Paul HAS to BE open and honest about it and then ends the letter with these words, "Finally brothers, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like minded, live in peace..."

That does not sound like expressive individualism – it sounds like a depth of commitment and loyalty and brotherhood that strikes us as almost weird!

And then, add to that, writing from a prison cell, Paul addresses these young Christians at Philippi and says, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others."

Combining the two passages, Paul pictures a church where people approach life in a unified way, interdependent, NOT individualized... like-minded in sharing a common life-purpose and mission and common beliefs... Not as if there's no room for differing opinions or individual distinctiveness but that the really BIG questions we answer the same way. Individuality NOT individualism.

And humility... no empty conceit i.e. no trying to impress one another or intimidate one another, "but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves." So different from our celebrity culture where self-promotion is expected!

And third, unity, humility and helpfulness, i.e. to actually learn how to promote the interests of other people and help them, "look out for the interests of others, not just your own..."

To our ears it's extreme ... I'm sure it was to their ears as well...They had their own peculiar trials. For us, our affluence gets in the way (we don't need each other), for them, their poverty and need got in the way. "I NEED help – so how can I GIVE help?"

But what makes the whole thing UNIVERSALLY radical (1stC or 21stC) is that it's all attached to an extreme example: "have the same mindset that was demonstrated in Jesus Christ..." He's equal with God but put aside that privilege and became lower ...became... a servant and humbled Himself and became obedient in the extreme...to death... even the worst kind of death ... the criminal's death ...covered in shame and spit. "He was committed to others, not Himself – go and do the same."

If the sermon ended here, I think we'd go away thinking one of two things: "There's NO WAY anyone could live that way (like a doormat!) so what T.J. must mean is 'be nice' – I think that's the paraphrase of the whole sermon... be nice!"

OR we might say – if we're more honest and courageous: "THAT IS UTTERLY CRUSHING! The Bible is demanding something of me that goes against my own tendencies...and against societal trends. I can't make myself as generous and good ... and humble as Jesus. Even if I tried... I think I'd just look... weird."

But, thankfully, this is NOT the end of the sermon or story: it's not demands PERIOD (end of sermon) ...but extreme demands and extravagant resources!!

What we need ...ALL we could possibly need to live in real authentic community...the resources are highlighted in these texts. Look at the intro to the second passage. It begins with the bright materials we need: v. 1: "... encouragement in Christ ... consolation of love...fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion". It begins with an inventory of provisions. This is NOT a command to make bricks with out straw – it starts with the goods!

The same can be said of the first text: it's a blessing and even though it looks like commands, it's really a benediction, "Go in peace!" You're family! Rejoice! (Be happy!)... become complete...be comforted...be like-minded ...live in peace..." The idea IS, "YOU ARE UNDER THE CRAZY, EXTRAVAGANT, RIDICULOUSLY AMAZING LOVE OF GOD – EVERYTHING ELSE IS SMALL POTATOES!"

God loves you and has proven it by paying your ransom at infinite cost to Himself. He took responsibility for your great sin; He bore the consequences. In Jesus Christ, He took the blame that belonged to YOU – He became obedient like you were required to be but weren't (not a single one of us!) and then He took the place of criminal – the place YOU deserved! That CROSS was meant for YOU and He was suspended between our sinful planet and the holy, holy, holy Heaven and JUSTICE came from above and swallowed Him. He was treated as a law-breaker IN YOUR PLACE. And now NO ONE CAN separate you from the love of God (Phil spoke about it last week – "no condemnation!")

See, Paul wants us to trip over this and to encounter it in a new and surprising way. That's why he words it in this odd way in Philippians ch. 2: it anticipates a positive answer but makes us linger: "If there is any encouragement in Christ..." "IF" ...AND IS THERE?

The reader has to answer in faith, "Yes, Paul, there is!" And IF there's any consolation of love...and IS there? "Yes, Paul, there is!" AND IF there is any fellowship of the Spirit...if any affection and compassion... AND IS THERE? Are these materials, are they or are they not in what God has done for us in the gospel?" – Well YES they ARE present!

And are there any shortages? Of anything? – No! It's all there – God has treated me like a priceless treasure – loved by the father in the same way Jesus Christ is loved. Remember Christ's prayer: "I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me." (John 17:23) (see Gen. 15.8ff; Exo. 17.4-6).

Like Jesus is saying: "If the Spirit shares all that is Mine with you – will He not give you extravagant supply of love so you can love one another?" Yes, Lord.

And then the commands – which ARE big...and then the example of Jesus Christ which is even bigger and then a return to resources: Paul says, "I remind you, we're not obeying because people are watching – we don't obey in that old dead religious peer pressure way (with an apostle looking over your shoulder!) – we obey because God the Spirit is at work IN us – and as important – because He's at work AMONG us– "God is at work in YOU ALL (You – plural!) to give us the want to and the power to obey in a way that pleases Him – the new obedience.

You grow into WHO God made you to be by being in the place where God is at work and God is at work in the Church – God is at work among you.

Now let me end with some ideas as to how this might work out in your life and in OUR life – in this congregation. We have the luxury of being a mixed up congregation. We're NOT a group of clones but we have different personalities, ethnicities, levels of education and incomes, different politics and even different languages.

We have different skills and gifts – we are in the same Body (same DNA) but as diverse as a hand is from an eye. How can we SHARE our lives and the life of God (fellowship of the Spirit) in a way that South Florida needs to see – how do we USE the gospel for community in this excellent moment?

I want to give us four ideas – two in general and two specific to our particular moment on May 10th 2020:

1. INVENTORY: As we saw last week and I hope we see every week: a big part of the Christian life is simply remembering the Gospel, reinforcing it to ourselves, thinking about it in fresh ways, surprising ways and learning to see all aspects of life through this lens – that we were enemies of God... but in God's great love, we've been reconciled. The rebels have become the chosen sons and daughters. Both these passages urge us to that. It's why we sing about the Gospel and do everything we can to massage it into our hearts. Read the article (Centrality of the Gospel by Keller)

2. RESISTANCE: These two churches – which were established by the Apostles and very close to the original fire of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit (Pentecost) – churches so blessed with great teaching and the fullness of the Spirit – these churches had real problems. I mean conflict and resentment and all kinds of STUFF (Phil 4.2). So if we will really attempt to put God’s resources that the Spirit shares with us to work – if we attempt and expect to actually love one another – it will hurt. There will be failings. It’ll require the expectation of failure and the constant need of grace received by repentance and faith AND grace shown to others who fail too. “simul iustus et peccator” (simultaneously justified and a sinner.)

3. CORONA – Something is happening in the world. There are different political theories and there’s fear and panic and there’s real grief and heartache from deaths and untold mental anguish... and economic cataclysm (Trillions dollars in response – ONE Trillion is a one with 12 zeros) On the one hand people are more used to staying home with their little snacks (maybe it’ll be harder to socialize and be in real friendships where we actually touch other people than EVER before – “greet one another with a holy kiss”, i.e. physical affection is going to be harder) On the other hand, in the downtime people have been thinking and reconciling. We ought to think about this and pray for our world, our region and our church ESPECIALLY ABOUT LOVE and human friendship and relating.

4. MOTHER – Today is Mother’s Day. We recognize now – more than ever how much we need you moms. We have seen moms and grandmothers working to help children (sometimes adult children). Moms want these things for their children (Couldn't every mom ask that blessing that Paul did for the Corinthians? – “children, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.”

And isn’t the Church OUR Mother? – all believers in Jesus have the Church for a Mother (“the Jerusalem from above, SHE IS OUR MOTHER!” – Gal 4.26) and doesn't the Church want what every good mother wants – she’s calling her children home - “around the place we’d romp and play”.

Maybe some of you listening but NOT normally attending a real physical church... will see that the Gospel empowers you and compels you to heed that call... the Church calling her children home.

I can’t wait til we can all be back together again. What a day of rejoicing that will be!