

**ONE IN CHRIST; PHILIPPIANS 2:1-13; WORLD COMMUNION; OCTOBER 1, 2017;  
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It is the first day of October – it's World Communion and the month we celebrate the Reformation and this year the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. The term reformation conceals the depth of disagreement during that moment of history.

Actually, the 1500s was a time of revolution and warfare that engulfed Europe and Britain for nearly a century. It was a time of profound ideological, theological, social and economic upheaval and change.

The French philosopher Montaigne who was born just as John Calvin was publishing his *Institutes* witnessed from his youth to the end of his life the ongoing violence. It was an era of fighting that kept Europe in a state of civil strife – pitching one Christian party against another. Nearly everyone took sides: nobles against king, dynasty against dynasty, and state against state. The wars were as cruel as they were complex leading to hundreds of thousands of deaths in mob massacres, open warfare, executions, and assassinations. Montaigne's prolific pen avoided any mention of religion and politics for fear of reprisal.

The spiritual brawling that defined the Reformation was the latest iteration of violence in Protestant/Catholic garb. This is an old story. My wife is teaching our sixth and seventh grade Sunday School with Debbie Izatt. She sometimes laments, at the breakfast table, the graphic depictions of war in the Old Testament.

Indeed, even though Paul doesn't name it specifically, we can assume that fighting is what prompted him to write his letter to the Philippians. How to inspire a group of bickering Christians to lay down arms, to stop their gossiping, to quell their disputes and posturing, to cease the animosity and find common ground to work together?

Paul's argument is inspired. He quotes, in today's text, from one of their favorite hymns – like "Amazing Grace" or "Joyful, Joyful" might be for us. "Though he was in the form of God," the liturgical song went, "he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and being in human likeness. When he found himself in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Remember Paul is writing from prison to the church in Philippi. The founder of the church is on death row. His words carried extra weight. It may not be too much to say his plea is like the last will and testament of a dying man.

You could hear a pin drop as the clerk read Paul's letter to the congregation. Some of them got misty-eyed. They remembered how Paul worshipped with them on that first Sunday when they came together in their new sanctuary and sang that very hymn, ready to tackle the world, prepared to be an outpost for Christ in a harsh and dangerous city and region.

But as life went on their zeal dissipated into like-minded groups and shared interests, then into factions that vied for power and control.

How easy for religion to become a mere ‘going through the motions’ on the one hand or an occasion for self-righteousness on the other hand.

Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*, documents how great American companies lose their way and decline because they lose their originating focus. They take their eye off the ball. Collins comes up with his “hedgehog principle” which is basically “keep the main thing the main thing.” When a company loses its focus, it breaks apart into bickering, infighting, turf protection, and confusion of direction. To thrive, any group, including churches, must be able to clearly articulate, “this is who we are, this is what we do, and this is what we don’t do and this is who we don’t try to be.”

In much more eloquent words, Paul encourages the church to sing that our focus, our originating cause, our great mission is Jesus Christ. He was God in a certain form, God drawing all sorts of people into the realm of God. And Paul dares to urge these Philippians, with whatever hardship they were suffering, in whatever circumstances of disunity they found themselves: To “complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united and agreeing with each other. Don’t do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus.”

This is not a call to some Orwellian future, to parrot the party line; note that there is no dogma in Paul’s request. He restates, in simple words, the great commandment to love your neighbor as yourself; to put aside your own agenda, to think of your neighbor, to walk in his shoes.

Who could not agree with this – it is an appeal to live a moral/ethical life, free of party politics; neither conservative nor liberal and leaves room, allows for and respects those differences of opinion.

Throughout the history of the Presbyterian Church when doctrinal debates have sparked disagreement and threatened schism we have invariably come down on the side of the wideness of God’s love and mercy and not for or against any particular doctrine or dogma. Not to say that we haven’t been locked in disagreement, but when the final votes have been cast we have rejected narrow theological or social boundaries and opened, as wide as possible, the doors of the church to everyone.

I do not mean to gloss over those periods of conflict; we’ve had them and we’ve experienced the painful rending of the church.

Yet we remained open and welcoming to black Americans during slavery and civil war, the leadership of women in the last century, and the ordination and marriage of gays and lesbians more recently. More than a few left the PCUSA.

Yet, regrettable as this was, our constitution reminds us that even at the risk of sacrificing the institution of the church itself we are called to remain faithful to life and witness of Christ.

Paul wants the Philippians to be of the same mind as Christ *and* to work together. “Therefore, my beloved, just as you have obeyed me, not only in my presence, but now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

It was a brilliant strategy. He went to the heart of their faith embodied in a song and reminded them that the very words they loved to sing were not dead but alive in their life and ministry.

I wonder sometimes if the great leveler of our faith that penetrates the fortress of our hearts and enables us to leave our strongholds of opinions is when we are under the influence of music: hearing our choir sing a John Rutter text, or our soaring string or brass musicians crescendo with the power and range our Aeolian Skinner organ; hearing and feeling sublime harmony from great composers to the newest writers of sacred music does something cognitively; raises our endorphin and serotonin levels, connects us to one another in spirit.

Paul thought if he could get them singing together, he could get them united in ministry together. It is why Bach is called the fifth evangelist after Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and why Luther devoted so much of his life to composing and playing music – his “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” as durable a contribution as his theology.

It is why tourists flock to Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem; to hear the gospel choir, turn up the heat and make the place rock; music is what galvanized the anti-war and civil rights movements.

Music taps into the heart of the church and the heart of human experience; it reaches us where logic and reason fail to go. When Jesus and the disciples left the upper room, they left singing a hymn Matthew says because they needed strength for the danger that lay ahead.

We live in fractious times as a nation and world: we witness a debate over the national anthem as volatile as the act of burning the flag during the Vietnam War. Legions of Americans are divided by the definition of patriotism and free speech and we’ve set limits to immigration lower and more restrictive than anytime in memory at a moment when the world refugee crisis is at an all time high.

It’s good to be reminded of the reason we are here and to keep the main thing – adopting the attitude that was in Christ Jesus – the main thing.

If we can accomplish that – walking in the shoes and looking out for the good of our neighbor – the church, this church, you and I will make more of a difference than waving the flag or taking a knee.

Religion can be a moral and ethical guide for politics but sometimes the aim and purpose of religion transcends politics. Now is such a time.

When Paul admonished the church to work out our salvation with ‘fear and trembling’ he indicated the gravity of our mission.

You look at the world, the climate, our nation; it’s a challenging road we walk on World Communion Sunday 2017. Remembering it cost Christ his life can be discouraging, but then we can sing! Amen.