

Be The Church: Build Community
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Philippians 2: 1-13

Philippians is an intimate and heart felt letter from the Apostle Paul, written to people he knows well and loves deeply. Their relationship begins in the early days of his travels to that region when they first welcomed him and the Gospel message he brings. Through the Gospel he shares, strangers become like family to one another. The tone of Paul's letter, which he writes from prison, reflects his deep affection for this community. The letter bridges the great distance between Paul and the community he loves and it continues to serve as a bridge across the centuries connecting us with this foundational message for Christ's community in all times and places.

In today's passage, Paul's love for Jesus Christ and the Church, and his desire for Christ's followers to practice genuine Christian community rooted in the way of Christ comes through loud and clear as he passionately pleads for us to imitate Christ. Paul describes what "*being the Church*" looks like by saying:

²be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

The "you" here is plural. It's really "all y'all". In other words, "let the same mind be in the Church community as was in Christ Jesus."

Paul continues with a glorious hymn describing how Jesus did not exploit the power and privilege due him as God, but instead humbled himself to become like us, wearing our flesh and coming among us in the form of a slave, so that we might be reconciled to God and delivered from all that separates us from God.

This passage profoundly reveals God's true nature through the humility, love and sacrifice of Christ. And it reveals who we are called to be as Christ's followers. We are called to be a community who makes Christ's love tangible to the world. We are called as Christ's community to bear witness to God's love and to build community with the wider community. And boy do we have our work cut out for us!

In his book, "*They Like Jesus but Not the Church*," ¹ Dan Kimball talks about interviewing college students to find out their thoughts about Jesus and Christians. He asked two questions: "What do you think of when you hear the name, *Jesus*?" and "What do you think of when you hear the word *Christian*?"

The students' eyes light up with the first question as they tell him: *"they admire Jesus as being wise, beautiful, enlightened, coming to liberate women"*. However, when it comes to the second question their mood shifts and they tell him: *"The Church takes the teachings of Jesus and turns them into rules. They don't apply the message of love that Jesus gives."*

Only two of the sixteen students interviewed actually personally knows someone who is Christian, so most of their impressions of the Church, is based on things they hear and see in the media about slick televangelists or encountering an aggressive street evangelist pushing tracks at pedestrians. Without a personal relationship with any Christians, they have no way knowing anything different.

This gives Dan Kimball an epiphany as it dawns on him that he bears some responsibility for this. He is contributing to their limited impression of Christians, because he realizes that he is not building friendships or relationships with people outside the bubble of the church. He is neglecting to being a witness to Christ, of being an example of someone who takes seriously Paul's urging to have to the mind of Christ in him, sharing love, demonstrating humility, and looking out for the interests of others above his own.

Dan's epiphany resonates with me! As someone who is immersed in the Christian community, who works in a church, who moves in Christian circles, who attended a Christian college and seminary, I too realize how little I really know and am in relationship with people beyond the church community. And that's not good! God's Spirit is awakening in me a desire to connect with people in the larger community beyond the church: to get to know them, to hear their perspectives, to learn of their contributions, visions and needs.

Jean Vanier, Catholic theologian and founder of "L'Arche communities for people with developmental disabilities, says this about community: "When members of a community realize that they are not there simply for themselves or their own sanctification, but are there to welcome the gift of God, to hasten His Kingdom, and to quench the thirst of others, it is then that they truly live as community." ²

I experienced the power of such community through a Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) camp where I stayed in Mississippi in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina. There I caught a glimpse of God's kingdom unfolding while serving Red Cross meals to local residents and the recovery volunteers who'd come from east, west, north and the south to help with the recovery efforts, to be with that devastated community, to sit at table together sharing the meal being served.

In that moment strangers became friends as they listened to one another's stories, carried one another's burdens and broke bread together. They were men in green and white striped prison uniforms, an Amish man in his straw hat and suspenders, a retired pastor with the telltale tremors of Parkinson's disease, Cajun, Hispanic, black, white, rich, poor, young, old, men, and women of diverse backgrounds. They all sat down together united in community by the basic necessity of their common humanity - the need to eat.

The "Gathering Thought" on the front of your bulletin describes my experience of that shared meal in the midst of a community recovering from disaster: *"There are times in our lives when we grasp at once how vital unity is. It may be during a meal with friends or else at a family*

*gathering when we see all present conversing and happy to be in one another's company. Past differences or misunderstandings may not have totally vanished but they lose their strength and importance as the bonds of shared affection are celebrated. Such experiences are privileged moments. Unity becomes a living reality. And we realize that it is a gift, perhaps the greatest of all."*³

Gathering around a meal is conducive for building community. The Lord's Supper is foundational for Christian community. Today is *World Communion Sunday*, which reminds us of how big this table really is. Jesus the host gathers us in community at this table as family, across boundaries of nationality, race, politics, sexual orientation, citizenship or anything else that divides us. In today's bulletin is the image of a painting by Hyatt Moore called "The Last Supper with Twelve Tribes". This is not a picture about the Last Supper. It's about the Next Supper, the one where all the tribes of the earth will sit as one community in God's Kingdom. This table is where we are formed in community as Christ's Church. And from this table we are sent into the world to build a community of love. Let us go in humility looking out for the interests of others above our own and letting the mind of Christ be in us.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.



The Last Supper with Twelve Tribes by artist Hyatt Moore. painted to commemorate the inclusion of all peoples under God. Depicted (from left) are: *Crow of Montana, Berber of North Africa, Masai of Kenya, China, Ecuador, Afghanistan, Jesus, Ethiopia, Tzeltal of Mexico, Canela of Brazil, Papua New Guinea, Salish of British Columbia, Mongolia.* The Last Supper with Twelve Tribes. His art can be found at <http://www.hyattmoore.com>

1 Dan Kimball, "They Like Jesus but Not the Church" (Zondervan, 2007)

2 *On Community*, Jean Vanier <https://imagodeicommunity.ca/on-spiritual-issues/on-community-by-jean-vanier/>

3 Adapted from the quarterly 'Letter from Taize', 2009.

www.northelmhamvillage.org.uk/index.php/parish-matters/73-elham-group-churches/348-meditation-september