“Be of the Same Love”
Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Philippians 2:1-13

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 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. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

These powerful verses Todd just read for us come from the second chapter of Paul’s letter to the Philippians. It’s been called the most affectionate of Paul’s letters; speaking words of deep friendship and of unity in the community of believers, grounded and modeled in Christ himself. This passage was used as something of a creed in the worship of the early church.

What a beautiful word for us, especially for those moments in which we might be feeling dejected or anxious, and when our nation and world communities are fractured by rancorous discourse. The church, says Paul, is called to show another way. Be encouraged in Christ, consoled in love, sharing the Spirit, in compassion and sympathy: be of the same mind, having the same love...

A contemporary hymn writer who is a Presbyterian pastor, John Dalles, puts it this way in his hymn: “Come Celebrate the Journey:"

“Come, celebrate the journey, begun so long ago: A Church formed by the Spirit, God’s love and peace to show, was faithfully assembled together in one place, to worship, work and witness, united by Christ’s grace.”

Decades ago, during World War II, Rev. J.B. Phillips, a British Anglican priest was serving as pastor of the Church of the Good Shepherd in London. He was so disappointed to find that the youth in his church did not understand the Bible, that he began to paraphrase the New Testament in modern English, while sitting in the bomb shelters during the London Blitz. The youth were drawn to his translation because they could finally understand what the Bible was saying.

But Phillips knew that reading of the words was not the end of the disciple’s journey, but the beginning. In a later book he wrote: “suppose Christianity is not a religion but a way of life, a falling in love with God, and, through [God] a falling in love with our fellows. Of course, such a way is hard and costly, but it is also joyous and rewarding even in the here-and-now. People who follow that Way know beyond all possible argument that they are in harmony with the purpose of God, that Christ is with them and in them as they set about [God’s] work in our disordered world.”

Hear how Phillips translates Paul’s words we hear this morning: “Now if your experience of Christ’s encouragement and love means anything to you, if you have known something of the fellowship of his Spirit, and all that it means in kindness and deep sympathy, do make my best hope for you come true! Live together in harmony, live together in love, as though you had only one mind and one spirit between you.”

These are Paul’s instructions to us for doing God’s work in our “disordered world” as Phillips puts it. Whew. And don’t we have our work cut out for us these days! Disorder abounds in our world and even within the church itself. Recently, the President of the University of Notre Dame, said to his fellow Catholics: “…we Catholics should remind ourselves that while we may judge the objective moral quality of another’s actions, we must never question the sincerity of another’s faith, which is due to the mysterious working of grace in that person’s heart. In this fractious time, let us remember that our highest calling is to love.”

Paul yearns for the church itself to be the classroom in which Christians learn how to live in love. How to not let the things that might divide us separate us from one another and from the love of God. How to not let our focus slip from the mind that was in Christ Jesus, the example of Christ himself and thereby abandon the work and witness of God in the world, for the world.
Through the church, we are so fortunate to know what working side-by-side in love can do. Think of what we’ve experienced here—providing Back-to-School supplies for 60 families at Family Place, supporting families moving from homelessness into safe and fruitful lives. Think of us working in Haiti to rebuild homes and send food to people who would otherwise be starving. Think about how, right now, through the work of our California-Pacific Conference Disaster Teams, we are working in communities devastated by horrific fires. We know that we can instantaneously connect with people and churches and resources and expertise wherever God needs us to go and to be and to serve. And in doing this work together, we form new relationships, new friendships. From Santa Monica to Haiti to New Orleans to Smith River…That’s the work of love. It’s awesome, and no force can quench its power.

As Christians, Paul reminds us, we know this love through Christ Jesus. It’s an identity that shapes us and molds us and grows into better versions of ourselves, the people the world so needs us to be. Our Jewish sisters and brothers experience it, too, through a different faith lens to be sure, but equally powerful and formative. Hear these words written in June of 1946…a 13-year-old Ruth Bader (we know her as Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg)...in a letter she wrote in her synagogue’s newsletter. Speaking of the deep scars of World War II, this 13-year old wrote: “We are part of a world whose unity has been almost completely shattered. No one can feel free from danger and destruction until the many torn threads of civilization are bound together again. We cannot feel safer until every nation, regardless of weapons or power, will meet together in good faith, the people worthy of mutual association.

“There can be a happy world and there will be once again, when [we] create a strong bond towards one another, a bond unbreakable by a studied prejudice or a passing circumstance. Then and only then shall we have a world built on the foundation of the Fatherhood of God and whose structure is the Brotherhood of Man.”

In another era, amidst another war, American patriot Thomas Payne wrote: “These are the times that try men’s souls…” Again, now, we live in soul-trying times in our fractious and disordered world. Faith calls us all to another way, the unity and harmony of which Paul writes. Let us hear his words as the clarion call that they are, a call to be better versions of ourselves, working together, side by side, to build a better world, a happy world, falling in love with God, as J.B. Phillips put it, and through God, falling in love with our brothers and sisters.

Be encouraged in Christ, wrote Paul, consoled in love, sharing the Spirit, in compassion and sympathy: be of the same mind, having the same love...

May God show us ways to love ourselves and our world into the ways of peace and the paths of righteousness and justice.

Notes:


NPR interview with the rabbi of Justice Ginsburg’s synagogue. NPR. September, 2020.