Finding God’s Peace in Tumultuous Times:
A Pandemic Devotional from the New Testament Book of Philippians

Devotional 4  April 9, 2020  by Rev. Dr. Kent R. Walley

Attitude. There is a lot of attitude around when there are teenagers in the family. I remember the days well. There is plenty of attitude – gruff interactions, door slams, the silent treatment, angry outbursts, screaming, and other volatile emotional moments – and that’s just the parents! I am not even going to mention the attitudes of the teenagers themselves! But seriously, our children were great, but just like most families at that stage of life, we had our moments navigating our way through having children in their teenage years. The tension that arises during those times with the “generation gap” can easily put all of the family members into a grouchy place.

Have you found yourself getting grouchy with family members or even yourself lately? We are all supposed to stay home as much as we can. Work from home. Go to school at home. Worship at home. Togetherness is great, with family and spouses. But too much togetherness can lead to conflict. And even if you are managing this pandemic while living alone, there is still plenty of opportunity to get grouchy with yourself – TOO much time in solitude!

Our attitudes are so prone to the circumstances around us. And this is true in our day and it was true in the Philippians’ day as well. Paul is writing to a church that is feeling the tension of perilous times (as we are) and the people in the church came from very different life experiences. At least we know of the two founding families: one Lydia, a businesswoman, a widow, an upper-class merchant who sold high end fashion – purple cloth. She is the first convert to Christianity in Philippi. And the second is the warden of the jail in Philippi. He is most likely a staunch Roman. I am only guessing here, but I don’t think they traveled in the same social circles. Add to that the prisoners who didn’t run away when the earthquake opened their cell doors. They stayed and listened to Paul and Silas who were singing hymns to God despite their difficult circumstances. Some of those prisoners may well have become followers of Jesus after witnessing the peace and joy of Paul and Silas from a jail cell, firsthand. (We looked at all of this in Acts 16 in the first devotional.) And so, an upper-class businesswoman, a Roman jailor and his entire family and a handful of prisoners. That would have been a quite divergent group that made up the early church in Philippi. There were undoubtedly going to be disagreements. And when the outward circumstances raise everyone’s stress levels – there will be “attitudes” to deal with. Plenty of attitude.

There is in this passage a great reminder to us when that unwanted attitude creeps in. Adopt a different mindset, says Paul. If you are a follower of Jesus, then follow Jesus’ example. We may struggle to forgive someone, we may struggle to get along, we may struggle with annoying personality traits, we may struggle in loneliness and isolation – whatever your struggle – remember the mindset and the attitude of Jesus. That’s where Paul takes us in today’s reading. There are some classic theological questions that have been raised about this passage – but in the midst of them, we don’t want to lost sight of Paul’s purpose in giving this wonderful hymn about Christ’s giving of Himself for us – Paul’s purpose was to encourage us to adopt similar attitudes of service and humility.

Read, Reflect and Apply** – As you read and listen for the Voice of God to you today, can you relinquish your agendas. Can you “be still and know that” He is God? (See Ps 46). Can you humbly listen for that other voice, not the voice of your needs, desires and assertions, but that other voice, the Voice of selfless love, calling you to the same?

**Questions preceded by two asterisks indicate application relevant to your life.

Read Philippians 2:1-11 and then consider these questions.
Verses 1-5  Paul’s Urgent Appeal
*The chapter begins with a “therefore”, to what is that referring?

What is Paul’s urgent appeal? What is he insisting the Philippian Christians must do?

How does he make this appeal? You might find as many as six things Paul mentions to urge them to do this.

To really get a sense of it – you might try diagraming this sentence. (In Greek v.1-4 are all one sentence!) What is the main subject and verb and then note the modifying clauses.

The words Paul uses are interesting. In verse 1 he speaks of “comfort” of love. Might he have in mind The Comforter (the word in Greek here is paraclesis the same root word used by Jesus to refer to the Holy Spirit as the paraclete.) The word for love is “agape” which is selfless, sacrificial love extended even for the unlovely. That word is often used of God’s love for us. The word for fellowship or partnership that we saw in chapter one reappears here, koinonia to have in common. He is talking about sharing in spirit – or perhaps sharing in the Spirit. And the strongest Greek word for emotion, “bowels” or “inward parts” appears again. Note also the ambiguity. Paul says only “comfort of love”. Whose love? Is it God’s or Paul and the Philippians for each other? Sharing in the spirit – in a unified spirit with each other or in the Holy Spirit?

There are four conditional phrases, “If...” What is Paul saying here? How important is this? How fundamental is this? Why do you suppose Paul is piling on all these phrases and offering all these reasons for them to agree to do this?

How do you think the church is doing today with being unified? How are each of the individual churches you are aware of doing with it – or how have they in the past? How is THE Church – God’s people throughout the world doing? Why are we not more unified?

How is the witness of the gospel in the world diminished when God’s people are not unified?

How important is unity to you? Is there someone you need to reconcile with?

Looking at verses 1-5 – note each instance of a word for “thinking” or “mindset” or “attitude”. How many are there? These come from two Greek words – one for thinking or mental activity and the other for “deeming” something or “considering” something to be a certain way – also a thought based activity. They both refer to one’s outlook. What is the attitude Paul is looking for the followers of Christ to adopt that will create greater unity?

What do you think Paul means to think on the same things? Does he mean adopt a mindless herd mentality or we should all blindly follow along? Note he says here literally everyone should be thinking of the “one thing” – (“Just one thing” as we considered last session – there we saw Paul’s example, now he commands others to follow it.)

Paul says literally “Be one in soul”. What does that add to your understanding of what he is urging here?

How might “deeming” others or “considering” others as surpassing yourself help stifle “rivalry” and seeking “vain glory”?

How are you with doing this? How might it help in our relationships with one another?

Can Paul really mean this – humble ourselves and consider others better than ourselves, focusing not just on our things and but the things of others—the wants, needs and concerns of others? Is this just idealistic gas – or is it really possible? Well Paul shows us that it is – by pointing to the one human being who lived this way perfectly: the example of Jesus. Here is the blueprint to follow for having an attitude that pleases God.

Verses 5-11  The Example of Jesus Christ
This may have been an ancient Christian hymn that Paul is quoting here. The Greek language is very poetic. Or, it may be the Paul composed it under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Either way this is a treasure of the New Testament. Gordon Fee in the IVP New Testament Commentary on these verses says this:

Paul ... presents the essential matters of Christ’s story—which he narrates in such exalted fashion, full of passion and poetry, that what serves as the centerpiece of our letter is in many ways the centerpiece of the entire New Testament. Not only does all of the present section (1:27—2:18) lead up to and flow out of this passage, but
when Paul tells his own story in 3:4-14, as a further model for the Philippians to imitate, he clearly ties his narrative to this grandest of all narratives.

**What is your general reaction to this section of Scripture? How does it make you feel?**

*There are some theological questions here – and this devotional will not go into great detail, but will offer some helps. Let us focus on the reason Paul includes this section about Jesus – what is that again? The ESV Study Bible says:

“These verses were written not to spur Christians to theological debate but to encourage greater humility and love.”

*Who is Jesus according to these verses? What is His nature?*

*What were Jesus’ rights – what was due Him? And yet what role did He choose when He came to earth?*

“Form” sounds like appearance, but it is really indicating a the same in essence. The Greek word used in verse 6 is morphe. Fee’s comments about the use of the word are helpful:

**Paul’s] urgency is to say something about Christ’s “mindset” in both expressions of his being, first as God and second in his humanity. But in the transition from Christ’s "being God" to his "becoming human," Paul expresses by way of metaphor the essential "shape" of that humanity: Christ "took on the 'form' of a slave." Since morphe can denote "form" or "shape" in terms of both the external features by which something is recognized and the characteristics and qualities that are essential to it, it was precisely the right word to characterize both the reality (his being God) and the metaphor (his taking on the role of a slave). On the basis of Christ's resurrection and ascension, his earliest followers had come to believe that the One whom they had known as truly human had himself known prior existence in the "form" of God—not meaning that he was "like God but really not" but that he was characterized by what was essential to being God. This understanding (correctly) lies behind the NIV's in very nature God.

*What then is Paul’s point about Jesus’ outlook or attitude?**

**What do you think such an attitude looks like in our lives? Can you think of examples from your personal life, where you have adopted this attitude or perhaps times when you have fallen short?**

*Jesus was due everything by right. But He didn’t “grasp” but instead “emptied” Himself. Again, much theological ink has been spilled on these. “Grasp” means something like “use for personal gain”. While scholars may try to speculate and extrapolate what it means the Divine Son of God emptied Himself in becoming human—what does the text actually say? What does Paul say: how did Christ empty Himself?*

*As you think back over what Paul has written thus far in this Epistle to the Philippians and in how he conducted his life when in Philippi in Acts 16, how has Paul’s attitude been like that of Christ Jesus?*

**When do people in the world “grasp” at things for personal gain to the detriment of others? How would the world be different if we all lived like this following the example of Jesus? What do you need to relinquish right now for the sake of others? How might God be calling you to humble yourself?**

*How did God the Father react to the attitude of His Son?*

**What reaction does it prompt within you to consider all that Jesus has done for you? This devotional is being completed in Holy Week. You might take a few moments now to re-read the gospel accounts of Jesus betrayal and crucifixion. It is a mystery that we shall never fully understand, but by means of the cross we are forgiven and granted access to God the Father in this life and eternal life with Him in heaven.***

**Closing Application and Prayer**

**Think about your attitude. What needs to change? As you struggle to change, as you struggle to humble yourself in relation to others, you might consider this: Jesus laid down His life for you and was crucified for you – all because He loves you. Your struggle can’t be greater than that. Can you not then lay down your life for the sake of others?**