

Rev. Julie Belman

September 23, 2018 - welcome of St. James folks

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, ²make my joy complete: be 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, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. ¹²Therefore, 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; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Maintaining Our Commitment To The Gospel

One year ago this week was a sad day in my life. Does anyone here remember what happened on Tuesday, September 26, 2017?? Chip and Joanna Gaines announced that their hit television design show, Fixer Upper, would be coming to an end. Cue all the tears in the Belman household. Really - it was a tragedy. I promise not to spend the next 20 minutes listing all the things I love about Ol' Chipper and Jo - though I absolutely could!!! But at the top of the list (for me) is the way they ground their family in faith.

It really is quite remarkable. In a society where being Christian is not exactly mainstream, Chip and Joanna Gaines have never shy-ed away from speaking publicly about their faith. One of the things that has always impressed me about them is the way they center both their lives and their business around God. Their decision to end the filming of their tv show did not come following any sort of drama, scandal, or decline in ratings; rather, they feel they need time to step back, recharge, spend time with their children and see what God is calling them to do next.

I posed my grievances on Facebook following the announcement and one of my friends so poignantly commented, *“I have even more respect for them for making this decision, though.”* And as much as I enjoy their show, I had to agree. Despite their success, their loyal fan base and the potential they have for more fame and money through this show, their decision to walk away demonstrates their commitment to remain humble in God’s service to their family and their community. It is admirable (even if it is sad for the rest of us!).

This idea of remaining humble in God's service comes up in this morning's scripture reading from Philippians. Paul writes this letter to the church in Philippi from prison. He encourages members of the church to be humble not only in their service, but also in their relationships with one another. He writes, *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.*¹

Paul says humility does not come from the law, it comes from the Gospel; and Jesus demonstrated this kind of humility in his own life. *[Jesus] humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.*²

Paul urges the church to be more like Jesus, to imitate this humility in day-to-day life. *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.*³

Put the needs of others before your own needs, Paul says. Be the voice of Christ to a world that needs to hear the Good News. Be a servant to the Gospel and believe that God is working through you.

These are strong words and challenging commands, but Paul had a history with the church he was writing to in Philippi. It was the first church he founded on European soil. He cared deeply for them and the affection was mutual. The Philippians knew Paul had been imprisoned and had been praying for him. They sent a member of their community named Epaphroditus to him with a care package and while Epaphroditus was there, he got sick, so Paul sent him back to Philippi with this letter for the church.⁴

This letter was meant to encourage the Philippians to rejoice and live their lives worthy of the teachings of the Gospel. As in many of Paul's letters, he encourages the community to let go of the dissension surrounding Jewish laws and really just embrace what it means to live into the grace of the resurrection.

What is so compelling to me about Paul's letters from prison is that, in the context of where he is in life, he really GETS IT. He understands the depths of the sacrifices he is asking others to make. He recognizes that the faithful road is not always the easy road. Writing from a prison cell, Paul knows what it truly means to lay down your life for the Gospel. And, still, he calls his churches to rise up and make this commitment to serve God.

¹ Philippians 2:3, NRSV

² Philippians 2:8, NRSV

³ Philippians 2:5, NRSV

⁴ The Harper Collins Study Bible, pg. 1991-1992

When Paul talks about obedience from prison, he is living out that obedience. He, too, is struggling in his imperfect human condition to maintain his own commitment to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ. And yet, Paul still thinks it is possible. Paul believes deeply in the transforming power of the Gospel and he invites the church in Philippi to join him on his journey.

Today, our scripture lesson calls us to do them same. It encourages us to rise up to this level of obedience, service, and humility. It inspires us to rejoice in the Good News of God's love and to live our lives worthy of that love; worthy of the sacrifices Jesus made on the cross, worthy of the grace God bestows upon us, even in the moments when we fall short.

This will not always be easy. But in enacting Jesus' humility and love, we are doing the hard work that is required to make this world a better place.

My friends, the way we live our lives matters. I believe the reason so many people are captivated by Chip and Joanna Gaines has less to do with their home décor and more to do with how they live their lives. They unapologetically live out the faith they profess and their rise to fame has not changed where their priorities lie.

Here is the honest truth: In today's world it is not always easy to do this; to unapologetically live out the faith we profess, to remain humble in service to the Gospel, and to keep our priorities in check. We often engage in arguments that divide, rather than conversations that unite. We pass judgments against others when we should showing compassion and welcoming all people. We sometimes put our own needs before the needs of others. We are not always able to make our faith and our church community our top priority.

And yet reading this text gives us the opportunity to look at the lives we are leading; who we are, and perhaps, more importantly who we want to be and who God is calling us to be.

It reminds us to share the Gospel - to let go of our own desires and motivations and emulate Jesus in our lives. It boldly calls us to live the kind of life that Jesus led, even in those moments when it is not easy to do so; to be faithful, even when it is hard to hold onto that faith; to share God's love, even when a rhetoric of hate surrounds us. It evokes a spirit of humility within us and challenges us to be humble. And finally, to practice the words that we preach every single day.

My friends, hear the Good News: We do not need a hit television show in order to make this commitment!! We do not need to be imprisoned to make this commitment. This is something we can do in our own lives. We can make a difference in our community! We can change people's lives!

The last verse in this passage, verse 13 says this: *For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

I believe that God is at work in each and every one of us. This is a gift given to us by grace, but it also comes with great responsibility. A responsibility to share the Gospel, to be strong in our faith, to show others what it means to live the way Jesus did and to create the kind of world we want to live in.

So let us, as Christians and as members of Bethel United, live our lives worthy of the grace that has been given to us. Thanks be to God!

LET US PRAY: Speak to us, Lord, through the power of your Word today. Remind us again of your everlasting power. May we know your story and our place within it. May we remember your mighty works and deeds, that we might know that you are the God of all ages. May we claim your promise and share your love. We are here, Lord, lead us in your ways. Amen.