

When Fear Gives Way to Joy: 2. Encouragement Amid Conflict
Philippians 2:1-5
May 3, 2020
Pastor Steve Richards

A few nights ago, I was watching a presentation called Quarantine Quarrels – have you had one of those? There was a time when spending twenty-four hours a day with someone didn't feel like it was long enough, but after six weeks of this, mostly confined to our homes, some of us are feeling like we need a little more social distancing. It's not that we don't love each other, we need a little more space – and what one person wants to do in a space is not always consistent with what the other person wants to do in the space. Quarantine quarrels! It reminds me of the story of two porcupines huddled together one cold night to get warm. However, the closer they got, the more their quills kept pricking one another. Eventually, they abandoned the idea and moved apart. Separated and exposed, both began shivering, so they quickly decided to snuggle up close again. When they did, each jabbed and irritated the other as before, causing them to part for a second time. This went on again and again, always with the same result. They needed each other, but they kept needling each other!

Kids, does this sound familiar? Parents, does this sound familiar? Church, does this sound familiar? It is not a matter of if. It is only a matter of when. Conflict will arise in your life. Somehow, somewhere, some disagreement will move to front and center of a relationship. And in these days when so many options have been removed that we must be together – the good of family time, the good of relationship time, can wear thin.

If you remember last week, as we began our dive into the New Testament book of Philippians, Paul was in prison in Rome, writing this letter to the Christians in Philippi. Paul had been in prison for years – in Jerusalem, then Caesarea, then Rome. Falsely accused, unlawfully arrested, unjustly imprisoned, and yet Paul never lost hope. He was able to find joy each day because he had a clear purpose in his life. Epaphroditus was a member of the church of Philippi who traveled to Rome with news of the church, which he shared with Paul. Part of what Epaphroditus told Paul was that there was conflict brewing and according to what we will read in a few weeks from chapter four, it involved Euodia and Syntyche, two women in the church. Paul knew both of them. They were friends. They were leaders, who worked hard to establish the church, but somehow, somehow, some conflict moved to front and center of their relationship and now they were acting like two porcupines, jabbing and irritating one another. How is it that we hurt the very people we profess to love the most.

One Sunday afternoon in August of 2017, Amanda and I have finished lunch and I asked what she would like to do and she said, "Let's go to the Humane Society." And I thought, oh oh. Our dog, Daisy, had died a few weeks earlier and suddenly we were free – no kids and no dog. But I knew a visit to the Humane Society wasn't just a visit. And sure enough, this happened. Our dog, Winston Churchill, entered our lives. But as cute and cuddly as a puppy is, he didn't remain a puppy very long. And the bigger he got, the more out of control he became, so Amanda took him to obedience school. Winston had to learn who would be the alpha dog, the top dog. And it worked. He learned he didn't make the rules. That's why it's called obedience school. But what works with dogs doesn't work so well with people. But I'm afraid we keep trying. We sometimes treat each other as though we are competing for the place of top dog – at home, at work, at school, at church, in our relationships. The strong prevail and the weak get hurt.

Let's face it. Most of us have a pretty good idea where we stand in the pecking order and where others stand. How many of us have experienced being at the bottom of the pecking order at one

time or another? It is not a good feeling. And if we are honest, there have been times when we have flexed our muscle and put other people in their place. Paul realized this system doesn't work. It is not what Jesus had in mind. The push and pull of getting on top, jabbing and irritating each other – it's not what Jesus had in mind. In our scripture for this morning, Paul turns our normal patterns inside out. When you are in Christ, here's what normal means. First, **With humility, think of others as better than yourselves.** And second, **watch out for what is better for others.** And third **Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus.** That's the path to encouragement and love.

If we are in Christ, we will share the attitude of Christ, and in doing so, we will find encouragement. Where does encouragement come from? Where does love come from? Maybe it's genetic. There seem to be people who are so loving we just want to be around them all the time, and then there are others, they just look at you and you feel like you've touched the porcupine. Or maybe love is some kind of chemical reaction – one look across a crowded room – and suddenly I'm in love... Or could it be the environment? Having the right things, the right conditions, the right person... Folks, if you've been looking for love in the right person or the right place or the right environment, then like the song says, you've been "looking for love in all the wrong places."

Paul says love come from God. It is the attitude of Christ. And when we find ourselves in the midst of conflict, start there – start with the attitude of Christ. "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." That's the path to encouragement. That's the path to love. It gives new meaning to being the top dog. It turns the pecking order inside out. And it begins with you.

This time of social distancing has become the perfect time to focus on encouragement.

- Last week, I posted a video that you can see on Facebook or our YouTube channel. I was holding my grandson while I talked about what I hoped to be able to share with him one day about the year 2020 and how in the midst of a pandemic, a nation learned how to encourage one another.
- On Friday, I was walking our dog through the neighborhood, when I saw this [sidewalk art: "we miss you"]. We live near Oakwood Elementary School and one of the teacher wrote this message of encouragement on the path. It felt good to see that.
- On Thursday, some of us offered a drive-by to the residents of Ridgpointe Senior Living. There are a lot of people who are living in isolation and not able to see family and friends. And as they listen to the news, it feels like the risks to their health will require them to remain isolated for months – maybe even the rest of their lives. It was a joyous time as residents looked out their windows and gathered in the courtyard to be encouraged.
- Our youth are also providing encouragement. Our Teen Team (go team) has decided to sponsor a virtual prom next Saturday night. A DJ is ready, invitations are out, and everyone from their own home can participate.
- On Friday, there were nearly 100 cars that came to our May Day drive-thru. We provided a flower and a popsicle and they provided food for our Totes for Hope that is providing encouragement to families in our child care center.

All of this is happening in just a week's period of time. I think we've discovered the best way to get through this pandemic. It's the path of encouragement.

Fourteen years ago, Martina McBride co-wrote and then recorded a song that would be nominated as song of the year in 2007. The song was inspired by a poem that hung on the wall of Mother Teresa's children's home in Calcutta, India. She said it was also inspired by real life and the fact that we all face adversity in one way or another, so let's choose the path of encouragement. Before we hear the song, let's hear the poem. I'll say a line and then I'd like to join me in the next line.

People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered.

Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.

Do good anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.

Do good anyway.

[slide] Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.

Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.

Build anyway.

People really need help but may attack you if you do help them.

Help people anyway.

Here's the song, sung by our own Mary Sweet. Let's listen [video]

God is great, But sometimes life ain't good. And when I pray, It doesn't always turn out like I think it should. But I do it anyway. I do it anyway. The path of encouragement: **think of others as better than yourselves; watch out for what is better for others; adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus.** And that's how fear gives way to joy.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of May 3, 2020

Weekly Prayer: Today, I come into your presence, O God, rejoicing -- rejoicing for the opportunity to sing your praises. As I open my life to you this day, give me the inspiration and encouragement to face what is before me. Help me to hear your voice. Give me guidance and direction so that in all things I may know you better and serve you faithfully, through Christ, my Lord. Amen.

Monday, May 4

Scripture: Philippians 2:12-18

Therefore, my loved ones, just as you always obey me, not just when I am present but now even more while I am away, carry out your own salvation with fear and trembling. God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes. Do everything without grumbling and arguing so that you may be blameless and pure, innocent children of God surrounded by people who are crooked and corrupt. Among these people you shine like stars in the world because you hold on to the word of life. This will allow me to say on the day of Christ that I haven't run for nothing or worked for nothing. But even if I am poured out like a drink offering upon the altar of service for your faith, I am glad. I'm glad with all of you. You should be glad about this in the same way. Be glad with me!

Observation: Conflict is a part of human interaction. It cannot be avoided. It is not necessarily bad - in fact, much good can come out of conflict when handled appropriately. The Christians in Philippi also experienced grumbling and complaining (conflict) within the church. Paul repeatedly teaches that salvation is a gift, not earned by works. Christians are to live in a way that reflects the grace and salvation received through Christ.

Application: Notice verse 14 ties in once more to the conflict in the church - but it is also a verse worth committing to memory for our own lives! How can you "shine like stars" and in what ways do you "hold on to the word of life?" When stars shine, others see the stars. In these days of fear and uncertainty, what are others seeing when they look at you?

Prayer: Dear Jesus, all day long, I want to glorify you in my life. May I be the kind of light in this world that will allow others to see your grace and goodness. Amen.

Tuesday, May 5

Scripture: Philippians 2:19-30

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to see you soon so that I may be encouraged by hearing about you. I have no one like him. He is a person who genuinely cares about your well-being. All the others put their own business ahead of Jesus Christ's business. You know his character, how he labors with me for the gospel like a son works with his father. So he is the one that I hope to send as soon as I find out how things turn out here for me. I trust in the Lord that I also will visit you soon. I think it is also necessary to send Epaphroditus to you. He is my brother, coworker, and fellow soldier; and he is your representative who serves my needs. He misses you all, and he was upset because you heard he was sick. In fact, he was so sick that he nearly died. But God had mercy on him—and not just on him but also on me, because his death would have caused me great sorrow. Therefore, I am sending him immediately so that when you see him again you can be glad and I won't worry. So welcome him in the Lord with great joy and show great respect for people like him. He risked his life and almost died for the work of Christ, and he did this to make up for the help you couldn't give me.

Observation: These two short paragraphs about Timothy and Epaphroditus help us get to know Paul and how his work and his feelings go together. He is essentially providing references for them both, and in doing so, we learn what is important to Paul.

Application: Paul mentions Timothy as an example of the attitude he has urged the Philippians to adopt in verses 1-4. He has learned the art of putting others before himself. How are you putting humility into practice? Epaphroditus also sought the well-being of others before himself and was even prepared to lay down his life for the gospel. In such an attitude, Paul found joy. How has putting your faith to work in your daily life brought forth joy?

Prayer: Lord God, help me to be aware of your presence with me throughout my day, inviting me to treat others in ways that will acknowledge your work in me. Thank you for your grace when I need to try again. Amen.

Wednesday, May 6

Scripture: Philippians 3:1-11

So then, my brothers and sisters, be glad in the Lord. It's no trouble for me to repeat the same things to you because they will help keep you on track. Watch out for the "dogs." Watch out for people who do evil things. Watch out for those who insist on circumcision, which is really mutilation. We are the circumcision. We are the ones who serve by God's Spirit and who boast in Christ Jesus. We don't put our confidence in rituals performed on the body, though I have good reason to have this kind of confidence. If anyone else has reason to put their confidence in physical advantages, I have even more: I was circumcised on the eighth day. I am from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin. I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews. With respect to observing the Law, I'm a Pharisee. With respect to devotion to the faith, I harassed the church. With respect to righteousness under the Law, I'm blameless. These things were my assets, but I wrote them off as a loss for the sake of Christ. But even beyond that, I consider everything a loss in comparison with the superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have lost everything for him, but what I lost I think of as sewer trash, so that I might gain Christ and be found in him. In Christ I have a righteousness that is not my own and that does not come from the Law but rather from the faithfulness of Christ. It is the righteousness of God that is based on faith. The righteousness that I have comes from knowing Christ, the power of his resurrection, and the participation in his sufferings. It includes being conformed to his death so that I may perhaps reach the goal of the resurrection of the dead.

Observation: Once again, Paul addresses conflict. Some Christians had been Jews, others had been Gentiles (non-Jews). Jews had been circumcised. Gentiles were not. Who were the true Christians? Paul was upset by those who taught that Christians needed to be circumcised and follow the law.

Application: Where do you see this happening even today? Christians often debate which "Christians" are the true Christians. How would Paul respond to such a debate? In verses 7-10 (begins with "These things were my assets..." and concludes with "the righteousness that I have comes from knowing Christ."), Paul provides his own personal testimony. What is Paul saying here about his own heart and the goal of the Christian life?

Prayer: God, I confess that there are times when I compare myself to others, thinking that I am better. Forgive me when I have used such comparisons to judge others. Help my measure of how I am doing to be my faithfulness to you in all things. Amen.

Thursday, May 7

Scripture: Philippians 3:12-16

It's not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose. Brothers and sisters, I myself don't think I've reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus. So all of us who are spiritually mature should think this way, and if anyone thinks differently, God will reveal it to him or her. Only let's live in a way that is consistent with whatever level we have reached.

Observation: Paul was accused by some of offering a "cheap grace" - that is, offering salvation without requiring people to leave behind their sin and prove their good works. Just the opposite

was true. But Paul challenged people to live transformed lives, not out of attempts to win God's approval, but in response to God's love and grace already given.

Application: In today's reading, Paul describes the effort that he puts into living for Christ. What would this look like in your life? Paul describes the Christian life as a race. The goal is Christ's goal. The goal is knowing Christ fully and the blessings that come through him. What is your goal for life? Remember that crossing the finish line is a point of great joy.

Prayer: God, the apostle Paul described life in terms of a race. I'm not always sure that I'm ready for a race. Nor is the goal always clear to me. Prepare me and equip me so that I am ready today to experience the blessings that you have for me. Amen.

Friday, May 8

Scripture: Philippians 3:17-4:1

Brothers and sisters, become imitators of me and watch those who live this way—you can use us as models. As I have told you many times and now say with deep sadness, many people live as enemies of the cross. Their lives end with destruction. Their god is their stomach, and they take pride in their disgrace because their thoughts focus on earthly things. Our citizenship is in heaven. We look forward to a savior that comes from there—the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform our humble bodies so that they are like his glorious body, by the power that also makes him able to subject all things to himself.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters whom I love and miss, who are my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord.

Observation: Legalistic Christianity robs us of joy by making our faith simply a series of rules. Libertine Christianity robs us of joy by promising salvation but not inviting us to "press on" and pursue knowing Christ. Joyful Christianity hangs in the balance found in Philippians 3.

Application: Paul describes those who only live to satisfy their physical desires. Can you think of times when you fit that category? Take some time to reflect on the way in which Messiah Church faces challenges from the world all around. What would it mean for us to really live as if "our citizenship is in heaven?"

Prayer: Father God, when I pray as Jesus taught that your kingdom would come "on earth as it is in heaven," I am attaching myself to your desire that my life would reflect what you envision. Hold me close so that I can see what you see.

Saturday, May 9

Scripture: Philippians 4:2-3

Loved ones, I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to come to an agreement in the Lord. Yes, and I'm also asking you, loyal friend, to help these women who have struggled together with me in the ministry of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my coworkers whose names are in the scroll of life.

Observation: Again, Paul returns to conflict. In a letter that emphasizes joy, there is sure a lot of conflict. Could the shadow side of joy be conflict? In today's reading, two women have had a falling out, and Paul appeals publicly for them to come to agreement. The hurt must have been influencing the whole church for Paul to mention them by name.

Application: Sometimes Christians avoid conflict at all costs - is this what God wants us of? Is it healthy? What might be an example of a conflict that must be entered into rather than avoided? Read Galatians 2:11-13 (But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was wrong. He had been eating with the Gentiles before certain people came from James. But when they came, he began to back out and separate himself, because he was afraid of the people who promoted circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also joined him in this hypocrisy so that even Barnabas got carried away with them in their hypocrisy.) Here Paul himself enters into conflict, rather than avoiding it. In Philippians 1:9-11, Paul gives us guidelines for how we deal with one another to avoid ungodly conflict. Let the words of Philippians 1:9-11 be your prayer.

Prayer: This is my prayer: that your love might become even more and more rich with knowledge and all kinds of insight. I pray this so that you will be able to decide what really matters and so you will be sincere and blameless on the day of Christ. I pray that you will then be filled with the fruit of righteousness, which comes from Jesus Christ, in order to give glory and praise to God. Amen.