

In Full Accord and of One Mind
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Philippians 2:1-13

¹If 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,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,

¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

¹² 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; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Matthew 21:23-32

²³ When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, ‘By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?’

²⁴ Jesus said to them, ‘I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?’ And they argued with one another, ‘If we say, “From heaven”, he will say to us, “Why then did you not believe him?”’ ²⁶But if we say, “Of human origin”, we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.’ ²⁷So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’ And he said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

²⁸ ‘What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.”’ ²⁹He answered, “I will not”; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, “I go, sir”; but he did not go. ³¹Which of the two did

the will of his father?’ They said, ‘The first.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

I am a big fan of musicals - right about this time of year I usually start watching *White Christmas*. Trust me, I know how crazy that sounds. It’s even crazier when I tell you I watch it on repeat while working on holiday activities like baking cookies or wrapping presents. I probably average forty viewings between the time from which I begin watching until Christmas. But that’s a musical for another day. Reading over the readings for today, a song from the movie adaptation of the musical *Godspell* kept popping into my mind. For those of you unfamiliar with *Godspell*, I can tell you that it is loosely based on the gospel of Matthew, which, of course, is part of our reading today.

The song that kept running through my mind is “Turn Back, O Man” and the lyrics stuck in my mind are:

Turn back, o man.
Forswear thy foolish ways!

Earth shall be fair
And all her people one.
Not till that hour
Shall God’s whole will be done.

Our reading from Matthew today is a complicated one and I’ll come back to why this song was in my head as I explain its complexity. A little context for the reading helps. The chief priests and elders ask Jesus, in part, “By what authority are you doing these things?” “These things” could be anything from healing to preaching to offering forgiveness; know, though, that in the text immediately preceding our reading, the day before if you will, Jesus had entered town on a donkey and then entered the temple and overturned the tables of the money-changers and yelled at those selling the birds and other animals for offerings. Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” The chief priests and elders want to know of Jesus, “Who do you think you are?”

This question to Jesus is a trap: “BY what authority are you doing these things?” If Jesus says he has authority from God, then they can try him as a blasphemer for, until this time, there was a very direct and specific way the Jews understood the passing on of authority and Jesus’ path did not fit that way. In true rabbinical form, Jesus responds to the question with one of his own and equally tricky. He asks, “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” From the question it is obvious that he wants to know what the religious leaders will say about John the Baptist and his authority. More subtly, he is making a connection between himself and John the Baptist, for wherever John’s authority came from, so did his. The chief priests and elders know this and they cop out rather

than admit they might have been wrong about either Jesus or John or stand their ground and face the wrath of the crowds who clearly believed in heavenly authority.

Since the leaders did not keep up their end of the deal, neither does Jesus and, instead, he goes on to offer a further message to the people gathered around, and to us in the retelling. He offers a parable whose meaning is the clearest yet. Between the son who promises to do something and doesn't and the son who says "no" but does the task anyway, the second son is the one who would find favor. The one who changes his mind when he realizes what is right is the one in favor. And this is where the song from *Godspell* comes in. To change one's mind like this is to turn back to God which is the meaning of repentance. And this is where the complicated part of Matthew comes in. The message of John the Baptist was centered on repentance, on turning back to God. This parable of Jesus' is about repenting, about turning back to God. One of the strongest themes of Jesus' teaching is repentance - giving up those things that keep us away from God, such as following rules that have become distorted and behaving in ways counter to the will of God - and so, Jesus is like John not only in the way by which he gains his authority but also in the message he wishes to convey. The tax collectors and prostitutes have repented, have changed their minds from what they *thought* was right to what is really right; they have recognized that something different is right and they believe. The chief priests and elders are stubborn, refusing to change their minds, even after they saw what was right and good, first in John and then in Jesus. They have *not* forsworn their foolish ways, as the song goes.

The song went through my head not just because of Matthew, though. "Earth shall be fair, and all her people one." Is this not what Paul is hoping for among the Philippians and among the whole of the earth? "Make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." So there is no uncertainty, Paul gives them instructions. "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..." These words, too, are complicated, not for deeper biblical meaning but because of our modern cultural context.

"In humility regard others as better than yourselves." If you've ever been offered a slice of humble pie, it is doubtful you welcomed it. "Humble" shares its roots with humility and humiliate and so we may hesitate to think positively of such a word. After all, no one wants to be humiliated by someone else. And, as parents and caring adults, we do all we can to help kids have self-esteem so that they don't believe they are not as good as others - a particularly challenging task. Yet, if we are doing it right, if humility is not forced on us as a way to make us feel bad or ashamed, and if we don't equate high self-esteem with superiority, then we can live into the humility of which Paul speaks. Paul's humility is not the kind that should be perpetuated by verbal abuse and denigration. We are all equal in the eyes of

God; Paul calls us to treat everyone with the highest regard. To do so is to set aside the focus on ourselves.

And so Paul also says, “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” Again this is complicated by our cultural context but also, seemingly, a bit by the biblical context. Our culture caters to us feeding our own interests - it is a foundation of western marketing: buy what you want, have what makes you happy, go wherever you can afford. A response to Paul’s admonition would be to consider how you spend extra money, fun money. I am not a proponent of the prosperity gospel - I don’t believe God wants us all to be rich. I believe God wants us to live life abundantly and that living life abundantly rarely involves stuff. Few are called to monastic life. None are called to narcissism and complete self-indulgence. There is a balance between the two and only you can determine what is right for you. As you discern, Paul asks you to be mindful whether you are leaning too much toward self or toward other.

As for the Bible, how is it that we are to each cultivate our own gifts, our own fruits of the Spirit, for the use of the whole body if we don’t focus on our personal interests? It is possible to improve ourselves without completely turning in on ourselves. Hospitality is one of my favorite gifts for so many share it, yet in so many unique ways. If we use our gift of hospitality to regularly greet or host others, then we are not putting our interests above the interests of others. If, however, we find ourselves throwing gatherings because we want to have a reason to buy new serveware or show off a new recipe, perhaps we are looking less to the interests of others and more to our own interests. A life abundant is spent in relationship with others so, again, only you can determine what is right for you. Are you leaning too much toward yourself or are you leaning toward another?

Paul says, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” We can never be exactly sure what Christ would do in our very specific circumstances but we have guidelines from Paul, more so guidelines from Christ’s living, presented in the form of a hymn.

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.

Should we all be of the same mind, in full accord, thinking of others with the highest respect and considering the interests of others more than we consider our own, what kind of world would that be? How would the ills of this world change, maybe even be healed, because of such thoughtful behavior? That day, that hour when all think like this, the *Godspell* lyric tells us, “Not till that hour shall God’s whole will be done.” We often get discouraged for what will our little effort do in the face of such a big world? If we choose to do nothing, then nothing will change. But if we strive each day to behave closer to the mind of Christ then change is happening, *even if* that change is only in us, and so we’ve changed one whole person for the better. Do not discount the difference it makes when we change ourselves. There is no better place to start and no better time than today.

Let us pray: Holy God, send your Spirit to work within each of us that we might each day become closer to being of one mind with Christ and in full accord with one another. Amen.