

We Encounter Christ in Our Relationships

Pastor Vern Christopherson

PHILIPPIANS 3:17-4:3NRSV

¹⁷Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. ¹⁹Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

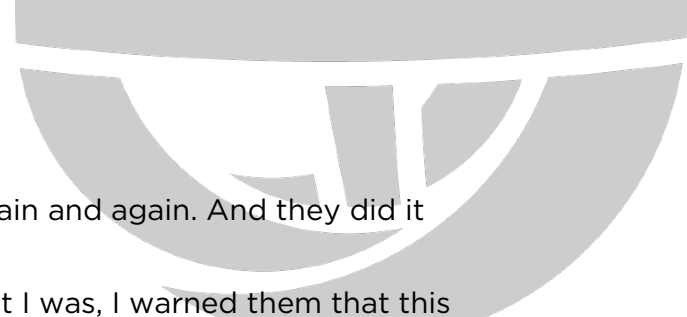
⁴Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

²I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

I grew up attending a country church in South Dakota: Roseni Lutheran. Roseni was painted white with a tall steeple and was set on top of a hill. You could see it for miles. As a child, I saw it as a sacred place. God lived there.

One day my two youngest siblings, Tim and Joe, said they had a surprise for me – at the church. Did I want to come and see it? *Sure, who doesn't like a good surprise?* We were preacher's kids – PKs – so we had no trouble getting inside. My brothers turned on the lights in the sanctuary. They had big smiles on their faces. Obviously they were proud about something.

We walked into the worship space. Would you believe that my two little brothers had run a bright orange Hot Wheels track all the way from the balcony, through the chandelier, and down to the altar in front? I stood there in disbelief, with my mouth open, not really knowing what to say. My brothers scampered up to the balcony and began releasing their Hot Wheels cars, which careened down the



track and toward the altar. They did it again and again and again. And they did it with absolute glee.

Meanwhile, responsible, upstanding, big brother that I was, I warned them that this might not be the smartest thing to do in God's house. I warned them that they better think about taking it down before some of the tried and true saints of the church got wind of what they were doing. And finally, I warned them that they better check the sky on the way home, because Almighty God might just decide to strike them dead with a bolt of lightning.

Fortunately, the Hot Wheels track came down long before Sunday. The tried and true saints of the church did not find out. And my two little brothers lived to see another day.

Fifty years have passed since that Hot Wheels incident. What do you think: Did my little brothers do something wrong? Was it sacrilegious? Did they somehow offend God – after all, it *was* God's house, right? And if God wasn't offended, what if some of the old-timers in the church had been? No doubt that would have put a damper on my brothers' antics.

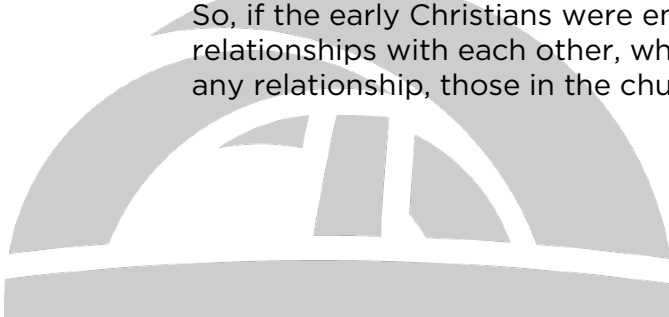
As you probably know, the Apostle Paul started a number of congregations in the early days of Christianity. None of them looked like Roseni. They were house churches. Each one struggled with issues of right and wrong, especially after Paul would pack up and leave to start a new church.

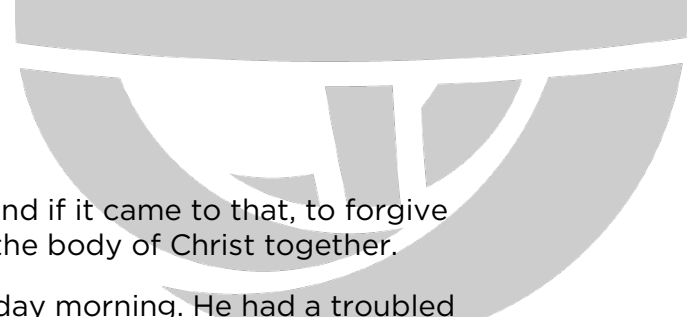
After he was gone, Paul received regular reports through his associates. In response, he would write letters of encouragement and advice. It's not hard to see why problems arose. The churches were filled with new converts. They were often in the dark about how to live faithfully. In other words, were those Hot Wheel tracks sacrilegious or not? Paul's letters helped them figure out those sorts of questions.

One of the major developments for both Jews and Gentiles was the importance of locating the Sacred, not in a temple, but in the gathering of God's people. The Spirit of God would live and abide in those people. Oh, Paul wasn't saying that God couldn't be present in a building, but just not in the exclusive sense that they used to believe. Indeed, God could be present anywhere, and particularly where God's people were found.

Paul often referred to Jesus' followers as the body of Christ. He pictured them as a family, living as brothers and sisters to each other. As a family, they were bound to have their share of squabbles, different ways of understanding God and God's workings in the world. In times of change, some were tempted to go back to the old ways of doing things, such as circumcision, while others were open to exploring new and different ways. Needless to say, some of those new ways got taken too far. People got offended. Feelings got hurt. The Hot Wheel cars came crashing down onto the altar. And if you listened closely, you could probably hear my father say, "The nerve of some people's kids."

So, if the early Christians were encountering Christ, not in temples, but in their relationships with each other, what do you suppose that meant for them? Well, like any relationship, those in the church needed to talk about things: to connect with





each other, to help each other, to love each other, and if it came to that, to forgive each other. When they did these things, they were the body of Christ together.

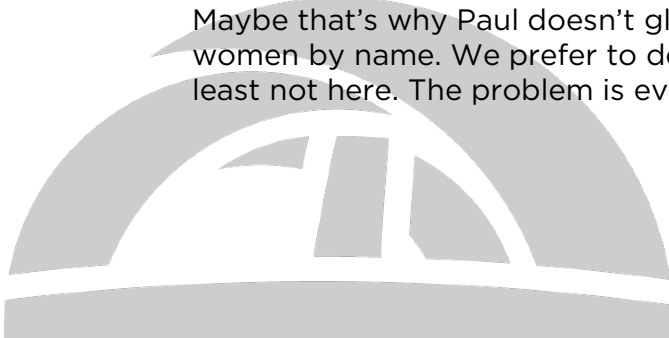
Zumbro member Tom Moon came to see me on Friday morning. He had a troubled look on his face. He shared that he'd recently been diagnosed with a brain aneurysm. The only reason doctors found it was because Tom had also just been diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease. The test that found the one found the other. Now Tom was facing the prospect of surgery to drain the aneurysm and to keep it from redeveloping. As I listened to Tom, I felt bad for him. It's been one thing on top of another. But I was also encouraged by something Tom told me. He said he'd just come from Friday coffee. He told his story to the regular guys who were there from church. He found their words supportive. Here's the way I see it: we encounter Christ in moments like that, when we connect and help and love each other.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul responds to a number of pressing concerns. He tells the congregation to imitate him. At first hearing, this sounds a little egotistical. Then again, the role of teacher and pupil, master and disciple, was well-established in the ancient world. The two had a special bond. It was assumed that the lifestyle of a teacher could have a profound impact upon others. When those "others" were first generation believers, with no New Testament to read, they needed all the help they could get. Perhaps you've heard the adage - *Be careful how you live; you're the only Bible some will ever read.* This adage was alive and well in Paul's words and actions: "When in doubt, imitate me."

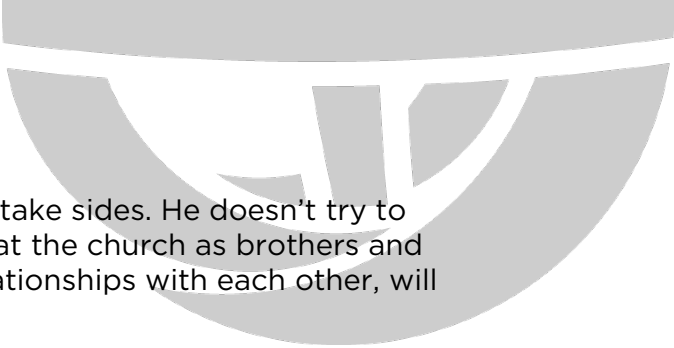
Paul goes on to warn the Philippians about some churchgoers whose lives are spiraling out of control: food and drink and pleasure have become their gods. They sound like libertines, who feel free to do just about anything they please. Perhaps their actions shouldn't surprise us. Paul has preached a gospel of freedom. He has said that believers are no longer bound by the 613 laws of the Old Testament, at least not as a way to be right with God. But evidently some have taken their freedom to excess. They're even flaunting it.

Paul chides them, "These are paths that can lead to destruction. Your minds are set on earthly things." He adds, "Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul is saying in effect, "Jesus will someday transform our lowly bodies into bodies of glory. While we wait for him to come, do you really want to do untold damage to the body you've been given?"

Paul has one more thing on his mind in our reading. He's gotten word of a simmering conflict going on in the congregation. There are two women - Euodia and Syntyche - who are not getting along. We don't know what the problem is, but we do know that words can often wound and feelings can easily get hurt. What's interesting is that these two women are described as partners with Paul, leaders in the church.



Maybe that's why Paul doesn't gloss over the problem, but instead calls the two women by name. We prefer to deal with such matters in private, but not Paul, at least not here. The problem is evidently serious. What's noteworthy is that Paul



expects the congregation to deal with it. He doesn't take sides. He doesn't try to solve it for them. But he does express confidence that the church as brothers and sisters, the church that encounters Christ in their relationships with each other, will be able to find a way to forgive and move forward.

As I see it, when the church is at its best, it's able to do amazing things. I've had the privilege of seeing the church in action over the last several weeks. It all started with a phone call from Heidi Shaughnessy of Zumbro. Heidi called to let me know that her cancer had returned, and she had only a short time to live. She asked if I could stop by for a visit. Heidi is a planner, you see, she likes to work ahead. She had battled cancer for the last several years, and she had some things she wanted to do before she died. For instance, she bought a couple of wedding presents for weddings that were coming up, one of them over a year away, and she gave specific instructions to her husband Bill about delivering them. She sent her siblings home to find pictures of her at various times in life, and then to put them together in photo collages for her visitation. She called up Hy-Vee and made the arrangements for her funeral luncheon. She told the guy on the other end, "Now I just need to know the date." She was trying to be funny, but he didn't laugh. And finally, as she did with me, Heidi invited friends and family to come by and spend time with her. It was a way to honor their relationship and say thank you. And one by one the people came.

I came more than once. Each time I stopped - and maybe others felt this too - I had the distinct feeling that it was a sacred moment, that we were encountering Christ together. It wasn't in a building; it was in a gathering of God's people. It was the body of Christ at its best.

Fifty years after my brother's Hot Wheels' incident, I admit that I might have overreacted a bit. I don't think my brothers were offending God. That said, they probably would have offended some of the saints in the church if their antics had been discovered. As the body of Christ, we need to be mindful of the thoughts and feelings of others.

Ever since the days of Paul, the church has been looked upon less as a building that houses God, and more as a people who find ways to connect and help and love each other. That doesn't mean that the building is not important. Rather, it's a gathering place for God's people to come and worship, before they are sent back out into the world in mission. What we do here is meant to equip and inspire us.

As you probably know, we are having conversations about our building at Zumbro throughout 2018. There are lots of things to consider. Whatever we as a church decide to do going forward, we'll want to keep our mission in front of us - *building bridges of understanding and peace, reaching out with compassion, and sharing the hope of Jesus*. And we'll want to keep the spirit of this week's Big Idea in front of us too: *We encounter Christ first and foremost in our relationships with each other*. Amen.

