



September 5, 2021
Sermon Series: Finding Joy

The Joy of Working Out Our Differences
Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner

Philippians 3:17-4:9 NRSV

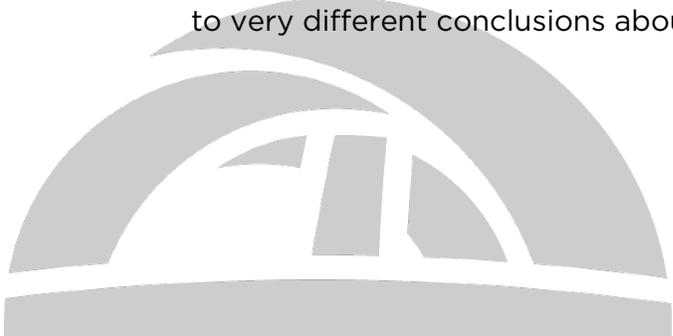
17 Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. 18For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. 19Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory 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 Saviour, 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. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

2 I 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.

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

I received a surprising email this week. It came from someone I often disagree with, particularly on issues that have been in the news over the last couple of years. Like a lot of these kinds of relationships, these disagreements have made it more difficult to see each other for who we each are or to have a meaningful conversation. Often times it seems we are getting information from completely different sources, and therefore come to very different conclusions about what's happening in the world.





So, you can imagine my surprise when this email showed up in my inbox expressing sadness about how these differences have impacted our relationship; and there was an apology for any harm done. The note continued with an invitation for conversation to work out our differences. I was glad to receive such a note and happily set up a time to meet next week. I don't expect that we will find agreement on all the issues, but that's not what matters. The path to working out differences starts with two people who see the world differently being willing to sit down together and share a bit of humanity and humility together, and trusting that the Spirit is at work helping us in the process.

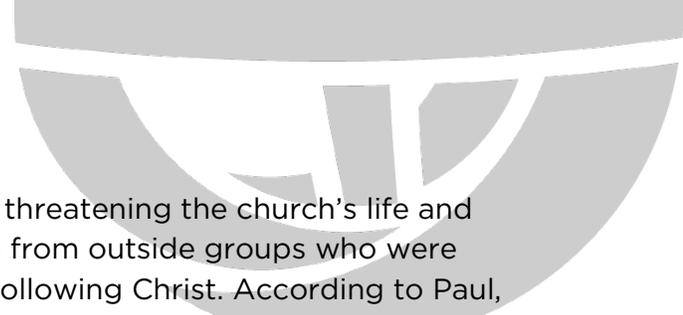
It doesn't always go this way, though. Especially these days when so many issues are painted as absolutes. It's easier to stick with our own versions of the truth and hole up with like-minded tribes, rather than try to bridge our differences. Yet the old adage from Lincoln is still true, "A house divided cannot stand."

Psychologist Bill Dougherty leads a group in the Twin Cities called Braver Angels. They put on workshops and webinars that help people who know and care for each other work out their differences over any number of issues. During these workshops the pair discuss their differences in front of a live audience and are coached to improve the quality of their conversation and ultimately help rebuild their relationship.

In a recent MPR interview, Dougherty was talking about people who are struggling to connect with family members who are either hesitant or against getting the COVID vaccine. He said this is a particularly difficult situation because of conspiracies and other misinformation that has been spread so widely. He said in this case, it's fairly common for the person in the relationship who is for the vaccine to want to judge and condemn their family member pretty quickly. And it is just as likely that those opposed or hesitant will dismiss any facts offered and refuse to listen to facts. Dougherty says the key to working out differences is respect. People have to feel as though they are being heard. It's the only way people hear each other, or change behavior. He suggests asking how your loved one came to see the issue that way, acknowledge their viewpoint and ask questions from a point of curiosity, rather than accusation. Without connecting with the person from their perspective first, there's little or no chance of them hearing different position.

Maybe you have found yourself in one of these situations recently too. Maybe it's not vaccines, but it could be a struggle over what your teenager wears, or where an aging parent should live, or differences over politics or policing, or any number of other hot button issues. Whether you're at odds with family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, or even other church members; working out our differences isn't always easy, but it's vitally important if there's a future for our relationships and for our communities.





Paul addresses these kinds of differences that were threatening the church's life and mission in Philippi. Some of the conflict was coming from outside groups who were stirring up ideas and values contrary to the way of following Christ. According to Paul, these folks were self-indulgent and greedy. They were not interested in a life of self-sacrifice and service to neighbor, as Jesus and Paul taught. Nor were these people interested in placing their faith in any other god than Caesar.

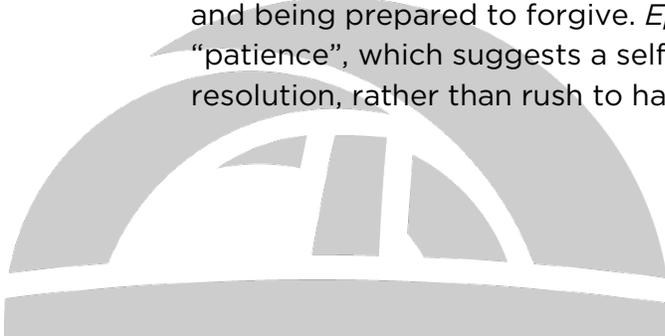
In the face of these threats to the church, Paul urges them to stand firm *in the Lord*. Biblical scholar Daniel Migliore writes that being in the Lord means remembering, "We are citizens of the kingdom where Christ reigns...Christ is our Lord, not Caesar. Our way of life is not set by what is expected and popular among the citizens of Rome, but by the mind of Christ."

And because we are called to stand firm in the Lord, we should not be persuaded to dilute the faith with self-indulgence or any other value than what Christ embodies or teaches. Now, I realize this sounds rigid, or even harsh. But consider what kind of world Christ envisions - one where people place others' interests ahead of their own personal gain. A world where the old and the young are cared for without question or qualification. A world where hospitality to the stranger is freely offered. A world that is rooted in love and joy and peace, rather than competition, oppression, and self-interest.

Here's what I think Paul was trying to get at: This isn't a vision the whole world is going to embrace; it's the vision for the church to embody for the world's sake. So Paul wasn't saying that the right thing to do was to kick these outsiders to the curb. Rather, he offers a solid grounding for which we can engage with those who hold different values than us. Our faith is built on being of the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, who though was God, did not consider himself equal with God, but humbled himself to the point of death on the cross, so that God would lift him up and we would worship and give praise to this God.

Today most people have some sense of what the church is. Most people have some idea of who Jesus is, but it may not be rooted in the joy-filled, self-giving vision Paul had for the church.

Paul's urging to "Let your gentleness be known to everyone" provides us a deep well of spiritual wisdom from which to drink. The Greek word for gentleness is *epieikes* - it can mean "to relate to others without harshness or coercion. It can also be translated as "forbearance", which implies accepting others in all their differences and shortcomings and being prepared to forgive. *Epieikes* can mean "kindness" or showing mercy and "patience", which suggests a self-control in order to slow things down to find the right resolution, rather than rush to hasty conclusions.





Let your epieikes be known to everyone. Work out your differences with others and within yourself with – *gentleness, forbearance, kindness, mercy, and patience*. That’s a vision for rebuilding relationships that we can understand. It’s a vision of faith in Christ worth standing firm in.

Yet we don’t always hold firmly to this vision. If we aren’t standing firm in Christ, it is sometimes hard to distinguish between the values of the world and the values of the fath. Christians have welcomed politics into religion from the left and the right, we have swapped the language of faith for the language of power and conquest. At times and in some places more than others, the church has sold out the gospel of radical love for the knock-off version of comfort and convenience. Yet, Jesus’ vision is still in front of us.

Please hear me, we have largely inherited this church shaped by culture and history. And unless we were all going to live in cloistered communities, we’re bound to adopt some practices and principles of the wider world that impact the message of the gospel. But here’s the thing, I believe naming these competing values, these ways we as individuals and as the church have veered off the path, can lead us to a different kind of future. It’s important we pay attention. Spending time in prayer and Bible study with others helps us clarify who God is calling us to be as the church. Listening to others from our church and community partners, especially from different generations or social classes can help us better live into the joy-filled, self-giving faith Jesus calls us to.

Working out our differences, whether they are with others because of conflict or from within because of the competing values isn’t always easy. It requires us to be open to the possibility of being changed. It may require us to admit that we are sometimes wrong. It takes patience to listen to others’ perspectives. But we never do this work alone. Christ is always out ahead of us. Christ urges us on. Christ calls us more deeply into God’s vision for faith. And Christ shows us that there is new life and abundant joy in working out our differences so that together we share in this life with Christ. Amen.

