

Following Jesus is a team sport

A sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Canady III
Rector of Christ Church, New Bern, NC, on October 1, 2017

http://lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp21_RCL.html

Douglas John Hall is a Canadian theologian, a tenured professor at McGill University in Montreal, and author of numerous books. In *Confessing the Faith*, he notes that when one reads the New Testament, especially the writings of the Apostle Paul, two things become readily apparent:

1. The Church is God's chosen instrument for accomplishing the Mission of God on the earth. And...
2. Something seems to have gone terribly wrong with that instrument.

In fact most of Paul's writings, not to mention the books of James and Peter, address conflict in the communities centered around worship of Jesus, and they address some way of resolving those conflicts.

Before I go any further, I want to be up front in saying two things of my own:

1. Every human institution is going to have conflict. We are humans. That's what we do.
2. Banish any thought from your head that I am going to address any conflicts this morning at Christ Church, either real or perceived. I'll use the word several more times in this sermon, but I'm only talking about what is often addressed in New Testament writings.

To Paul's credit, he tries to mention the people and places in those communities where things are working and advancing the mission of God. And then he points out what they need to do. He doesn't dwell on who is at fault or the overarching systemic issues; he shares what the ideal is for them and their community. It's like in some ways saying, "Let's not dwell on how you threw out your back; let's focus on how you're going to get better."

Part of the problem in the Church at Philippi seems to be two people who are bickering and dividing the community (4:2). I know! It's hard to imagine people in a church community bickering and not getting along. But it happens. (Or so I'm told.)

Paul's call in this particular passage is an appeal to unity. Not conformity. Not even "sameness." But to let the same mind be in them (and us) that was in Jesus. We hear this call each year on Palm Sunday, too, in case you thought it might sound familiar. Paul's call to unity is not unique to this particular group of people. We often hear and read him imploring people not to take sides or "pick a favorite" or credit

anyone other than Jesus for their salvation. Today's reading is somewhat different because it calls followers to look beyond their own interests.

But in putting the interest of others ahead of our own, we are to show humility. And this is where Paul is getting somewhat edgy. The notion of "others before self" is a theme in most of the world's major religions both then and now, and it was a tenet of Judaism that both Jesus and Paul would have known well. But what was unique is the **humility** aspect. In the Greek-speaking world in which Paul was living and writing, it would have been expected of people to boast about how they helped others. Paul is giving a bit of a counter-cultural spin to an age-old practice.

So Paul is calling for unity among believers and putting others' interests before our own by emptying ourselves of any ego we may bring to the faith community. Sounds straightforward enough. Challenging. But straightforward. And then there's this twist at the end.

In the midst of this well-loved passage, there is a rather discomfiting line: **Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.** He adds: *For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

At the end of this urgent plea for unity amongst the people at the Church in Philippi, Paul is also telling people that they have to figure out for themselves how they are going to live out the ministry to which God has called them. As this letter was being read to that community, you can imagine the exchange of puzzled looks among the believers. A bit of a "Say whaaaa?" moment.

You know I love a good sports analogy. We often hear of players "leaving it all on the field" or pouring every ounce of their God-given, well-honed talent to help their team to victory. For players in these team sports, leaving it all on the field means that they put their teammates ahead of themselves. (There is no "I" in "T-E-A-M.") And when Paul calls upon followers of Jesus to empty themselves as Jesus did, we can't help but look to the interests of others.

Following Jesus is a team sport, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise. We are all in this thing together to share the Good News of God in Jesus Christ; to help proclaim release to the captives and good news to the poor; to bind up the brokenhearted and proclaim the year of our Lord's favor. (Is. 61)

In Paul's call to unity and call to empty ourselves to seek the interest of others, we can understand his statement about working out our own salvation with fear and trembling to be about the role we all play in the building up of the Kingdom of God. "For God is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Not everybody is good at playing goal-keeper or outside linebacker or point guard or short stop. Not everybody is good at teaching Sunday School or cooking meals for people or

reading during worship. But we each have those things which God has enabled us and called us to do.

This passage comes to us in the midst of our annual stewardship campaign, a time in which we ask you to prayerfully consider how you will support Christ Church in the next year. No one or two people can make Christ Church the sustainable and viable community that it is. And in a church this size, we wouldn't want that to be the case. But when it comes to the time, talent, and treasure of the people of Christ Church, we all have **something** to contribute. As we empty ourselves and seek the interests of others while working out our own Salvation with fear and trembling, we must continue to remember that we're all on the same team, working for the same goal: **To be a church that loves the way God loves.** And God has given each of us gifts to bring to that work. The unity we for which we strive comes from living into our differences and the ways in which God is working through each of us in different and holy ways.

The questions we are left to wrestle with are How is God working through your friends and neighbors, and how is God working through you? And what is the **something** that you can do through and for Christ Church to build up the kingdom of God?

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