



**Reading: Philippians 4:1 - 9**

**Date: October 11, 2020**

**Theme: Who put the unity in community?**

*Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.*

Philippians may be a letter of friendship, sent to reassure the community that all is well and the news that they heard was not all bad, but it is also a letter written to address an issue. There was some conflict in the leadership of the community, and from the tone and main arguments in the letter, the conflict may have been because one or some of the leaders were a bit puffed up with self-importance. "Be of the same mind" is a phrase that recurs in the letter. Be of the same mind as Jesus who offered himself to the service of God. Be of the same mind as Paul, who gave up his life as a Pharisee to pursue the goal of life long following of Jesus. And then a call to the two leaders of the community to 'be of the same mind'. I don't think Paul meant be of the same mind in theological understanding of the nature of Christ, or be of the same mind in rejecting the Judaisers who wanted to impose the Law, or simply be of the same mind in whatever disagreement they were having. I think Paul meant share the understanding that the Gospel, the work and will of God, requires sacrifice and service. And that sacrifice and service is not sombre, dutiful obedience. Rejoice! Look at all that God has done in Jesus Christ, and the value of knowing Christ and being found in him, and set your lives at the service of the good news of God's love. Be of that same mind, be united in the faith, that is the overarching message of this wonderful little letter. A snapshot of the early church in a multicultural Greco-Roman city.

As I have noted, both in sermons and in the service material, Paul started the church in Philippi by addressing the small group of Jews who gathered for prayer at the river. A group led by Lydia, described in Acts as a 'dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira'. That group would have gathered at the river because there was no synagogue in Philippi, most likely because there was not enough Jews to warrant the building of one, the tradition is that at least 10 men are required for a synagogue. So, we can infer that it is a group of women gathered at the river because there is a small group of men. But that didn't stop Paul preaching and baptising and gathering a community of people in Lydia's home. The account in Acts is like a synopsis of Paul's time there. It looks like a short time, a couple of days, but then it talks of 'brothers' in Lydia's home. Surely the result of many days or even months of preaching and teaching and baptising. And the longer that he spent in Philippi, the more likely that we have this letter of friendship from a beloved pastor. And then we get to the greetings at the end of that letter to hear that two women are leading the community. This is surely a reflection on the leadership of Lydia and the open nature of the early church - there was no restrictions like needing 10 men to start a church! But, whether male or female, the issue is that there is a conflict between these two leaders and Paul is calling for them to set aside their differences and let their gentleness, their fairness, their moderation come to the fore

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and end the disunity. Be of the same mind recalls them both to Jesus, particularly because Paul has used that phrase earlier, the One true leader of the church, in whom and through whom all are united.

There is a lot of scholarly commentary, indeed throughout the ages, on the identity of the third person in Paul's call to unity - the 'loyal companion'. There is no evidence or alternate source to identify this person. The Greek word for companion - Syzygus - is also a proper name so it could be a member of the community called Syzygus. But more likely it is an oblique reference to someone close to Paul who would recognise a message without being named to the whole community. Some scholars have thought this was Paul's wife, although there is no other mention in scripture of Paul having a wife, quite the reverse. Some have suggested, and I like the suggestion, that it is an oblique reference to Lydia herself, still an important leader in the community, although the grammar of the word loyal in Greek is masculine. Whoever this person is, Paul is calling for a witness, a moderator, or an arbiter in the dispute to help these two women come to agreement and settle their difference. And he is asking the loyal companion to assist, not because they are a couple of women and they need help, but because they have been strong workers for the Gospel, and it would be a shame for them to fall from the path. A path that Paul has already said is hard and needs focus and determination and a life of sacrifice.

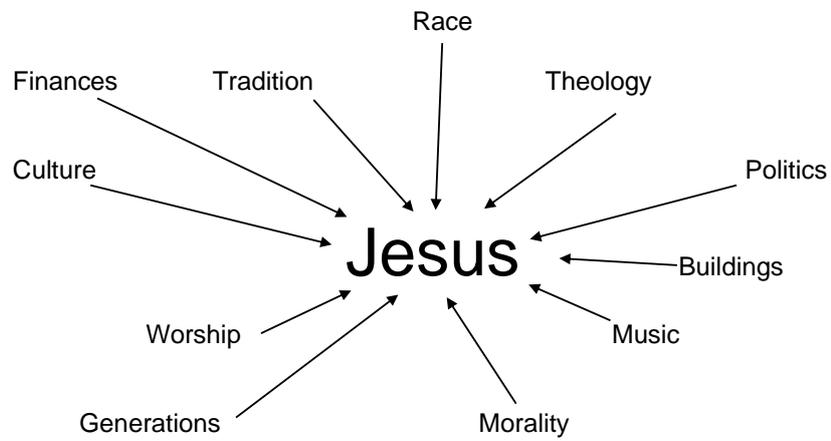
All that is background to get to the main point, a point that lives in scripture long after Euodia and Syntyche and the loyal companion; we can have differences of opinion, we can have differences in culture or differences in upbringing and understanding, but we are united in Christ and those differences should not cause that unity to break. We are only a community of faith, a community of worship and mission, because we are united in Christ and given the treasure of new life that lets us rejoice. This one point has been what the whole letter is leading up to. Some scholars look to the sharp changes of tone or subject in the letter and think this is actually a number of smaller letters of Paul to Philippi stitched together for posterity. However, if that is so, that editor did a wonderful job of making three or four letters follow one continuous argument; Rejoice! Look at all that God has done in Jesus Christ, and the value of knowing Christ and being found in him, and be of that same mind, united in the one faith, setting your lives at the service of the good news of God's love.

There are a lot of interesting details and information and background in this letter of Paul's - the sub plot around Epaphroditus, the generous financial support of Paul from Philippi, the connection to the other letters and to Acts, the mention of bishops and deacons so early in the life of the church, and so on - but the heart of the letter is Paul's joyous pastoring of a beloved community while he himself is struggling in prison. His call to unity and humble service despite the cost and offering his life story as an example of both that service and that cost. The Gospel stories tell us a lot about the life and teaching of Jesus, but the epistles open us about the struggle to live as people in the real world, following the teachings and the love of Jesus. Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice, we are the people of God and all the sacrifice, the hardship and the

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struggle is worth it; for knowing Jesus and being found in him is the treasure of immeasurable value.

The Unity of our Community



**Rev Ross Pearce ©**