EIGHTHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Phroneō* Philippians 2:1-13

At this time in the year, our Bible readings tend to center on the ministry of Jesus’ and the apostles, including Paul. And so, we have been listening, these past few weeks, to Paul’s advice to the churches he has planted, and stories from the Gospel of Matthew about the disciples and Jesus and their adventures in ministry.

Today’s passage is again from Paul. It is from his letter to the church in Philippi—another Roman town along the banks of the Aegean Sea. He is writing to them from prison in Rome. It is his first imprisonment there (AD 60–62). Despite his circumstances, Paul thanks God for the Philippians’ fellowship in the gospel and expresses his desire to visit them again [Phil 1:3–8, 26–27; 2:24]. He also sends Timothy to visit on his way to minister in Ephesus.

As you might expect, Paul references the life of Christ as he writes to persuade and inspire and educate the Philippians. And in the portion of Paul’s letter we just heard, we are taken back to the crucifixion. Paul calls upon the Philippians to remember the cross, and to grapple with what it means in terms of their life together as the body of Christ.

Throughout his letter, Paul uses a Greek word that I used as the title of the sermon: *phroneō*. There is no English equivalent, so in the translations we have, *phroneō* is translated as “having a certain mind” or to “be of one mind,” but of course, there is more to it than that.

Paul means to speak to them of unity, but he also wants them to understand and commit themselves to much more. And so, a little later, in the part of the passage where he quotes a hymn that describes *phroneō,* Paul points to the unity they can have in Christ. This becomes the focus and the way in which Paul wants the Philippians to form their life together.

You see: *phroneō* is a verb. It is an action word that does not only refer to an action or movement, *phroneō* also expresses a state of mind. Specifically, Paul wants the Philippians to have a depth of understanding about Christ and who he is that is so deep that it becomes “second nature” to them.

He knows that if they can do this, their lives together will be harmonious and caring. If the Philippians’ life and character can be lived within the context of *phroneō* with Christ they will always know how to act, even and especially in confusing or complex circumstances.

So, what Paul is doing is he is emphasizing the need for the Philippians to be unified through their relationship with Christ. He wants them to be at peace with one another, but he also wants them to know that they can have this peace, this unity, if they are truly “in” Christ Jesus—that is where it begins.

Unity with others begins with unity with and *in* Christ. However, turning the verb *phroneō* into the noun “mind”—as our translations do—loses the kind unity that Paul wants to convey. For Paul, what the Philippians (and all Christians) need is the kind of unity that comes from being *in* Christ. If we can do that, then we can rest in the kind of wisdom, gained over time and with experience, about that that means.

That is what is really at stake here—that is what Paul wants for the Philippians. This letter is focused on helping them come to a better understanding about how to achieve that kind of unity.

This is why Paul puts the lyrics of a hymn into his letter [vvs. 6-11].

*5Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*, (he quotes)
*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.*

In other words, Paul is saying that the Philippians’ unity is going to be found first and foremost, in humility. And they are going to find the perfect example of humility in Christ’s choice to descend from his position of power and status, “in the form of God,” to his taking on the “form of a slave,” completely obedient to God’s mission. Humility and obedience—that is what will bring unity.

Now, you and I are used to being reminded of the virtue of humility. We identify humility as something good and noble. However, humility was *not* a virtue in the world of the Philippians. In their world, the only people for whom humility was a virtue were slaves. And as we heard, Paul actually says that Christ did just that: he became a slave.

Christ begins “in the form of God” but then empties himself of all pomp and privilege. He does not try to put himself above anyone else. Instead, he became like any other ordinary human being. He specifically did this so that he could be with us; so he could walk the same dusty roads that every other human being did; so that he could feel hunger and thirst like all other human beings do.

If there is one true thing that we can say about Christ it is that he knows what it is like to struggle, to be afraid, to be tired—even tired of trying to be virtuous and obedient to God. Every last bit about being human is known to him. As one commentator has expressed it: *The practical wisdom of Christ manifests in love, sharing in the Spirit, in compassion, sympathy, mutual humility, and in shared concern for one another’s best interest.*

Out of love for us, God humbled God’s self and became like all other humans. God was born of Mary like other human babies so that he could be with us; so that he could be in relationship with us; so that he could show us how much he values us, how much he loves us.

It begins with humility—this is the model for the church in any age—even ours, we need to keep that always in our hearts and minds. Jesus’ humility came from his desire to come close to us so that he could show us his love. This is where our humility will also come from—our desire to love and praise God by loving others in all the big and little ways we can think of.

The bad news is that even when we can discern where God is leading us, this is not always easy.

The good news is that we do, sometimes, get a glimpse of such humility, obedience, and love—sometimes it is even in our own back yards.

And so, what I would like you to think about is how that kind of humility was on full display for us just last week—but also for the weeks that led up to last week’s celebration as we finished our Capital Campaign.

We did it! We raised the money we will need to repair and refurbish our Sanctuary!

 What I would like you to dwell on is that what we accomplished is not going to be exclusively for us. What we did together is not for ourselves alone. It is for God’s mission to the people who will be touched by what we are building; by what we have pledged to build.

You may not have thought about it in quite that way, but that is the truth of the matter: we pledged to the future of the mission God has set before us. We have pledged to love others—many of whom we will never meet—by assuring that we will always be able and ready to receive others; minister to them; share the love of Christ with them—the same love that he gave to us.

We are not a perfect people—none of us here are—however, what we have been shown is that when we trust in God, and in each other, then we are able to accomplish wonderful things. If we believe that we are being led by the love of Christ—a love that gives everything for the love of humankind, then we are able to love others with humility and generosity—we are able to pour out our treasure to accomplish God’s mission in our community.

*Phroneō* - that is what we have done. We have humbled ourselves and have trusted in God and in each other, and our desire to praise God in every way possible.

Congratulations, Nu’uanu Congregational Church! Let us use today’s after worship time to see and enjoy the way in which we have loved God by loving each other. And let us give thanks that this is all because we have been welcomed into the heart of Christ where he is pleased to make us his own. Amen.