

There is an old rabbinic parable about a farmer who had two sons. When they were old enough to walk, he took them to the fields and taught them everything he knew about growing crops and raising animals. When he grew too old to work, the boys took over the chores of the farm. Then, after the father died, they found their working together had been so meaningful that they decided to keep their partnership. So each brother contributed what he could, and during every harvest season, they would divide equally what they had corporately produced. Across the years, the elder brother never married. The younger brother did marry and had eight children. Years later, when they were having a wonderful harvest, the bachelor brother thought to himself one night, “My brother has ten mouths to feed. I have only one. He needs more of this harvest than I do, but I know he is much too fair to renegotiate. I know what I’ll do. During the night when he is asleep, I’ll take some of what I have in my barn and I’ll transfer it over to his barn to help him feed his children.” At that very time, the younger brother was thinking to himself, “God has given me these wonderful children. My brother hasn’t been so fortunate. He really needs more of this harvest for his old age than I do—but I know him. He’s much too fair. He’ll never ask. I know what I’ll do. During the night when he is asleep, I’ll take some of what I have in my barn and I’ll move it over to his barn.” And so one night when the moon was full, those two brothers came face to face, each on a mission of generosity. The old rabbi said that there wasn’t a cloud in the sky, but a gentle rain began to fall. You know what it was? God was weeping for joy because two of his children got the point. —John Claypool, copied.

This story reminded me of these words from our Epistle for today, where St. Paul writes, “Let each of you look not to your interests, but to the interests of others.” Each of these loving brothers had the other in mind as they made their midnight transfers of grain, both motivated by love. That IS getting the point, isn’t it?

I preached from one of the other epistles a few weeks ago and mentioned the power that they have to speak to us directly as a Christian community today. They were written to people just like us struggling to learn how to be followers of Jesus.

This particular letter to the Philippians or the Church at Philippi has been called St. Paul's love letter to the Church. It is called this because it is a letter of encouragement to a community that was by in large living for Christ already. Some of St. Paul's other letters, you remember, are addressing problems that have arisen in the communities of faith. This letter is instruction about how to keep the faith that they were already practicing.

This second chapter is particularly powerful because it centers in on Jesus, as it should, as our model, the one we must emulate, the one we must follow. St. Paul talks about how Jesus was able to live into the humility that was so evident in his life. He writes, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness."

The Greek word that refers to emptying himself is called "kenosis" and I bring that word up this morning just so you will be familiar with it. Kenosis or emptying himself meant that Jesus laid aside his rights as God and chose to become fully human as God's servant or slave in his life here on earth.

St. Paul goes on to say, "And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every

tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.”

Now going back to the first of the passage, listen again to these words of encouragement from St. Paul to the people of Grace Church, Asheville. “If there is any encouragement in Christ, (and of course there is great encouragement for us in Christ), any consolation from love, (and we are consoled by Christ’s love for us all of our lives), any sharing of the Spirit (in another place St. Paul reminds us that the same Holy Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead dwells in each of us) any compassion and sympathy (compassion and sympathy are two of Jesus’ primary attributes that he imputes to us as his disciples if we are receptive) make my joy complete (St. Paul says) be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

In my opinion, because of the work of God’s Holy Spirit in this place, I would say that there is a oneness here at Grace that the Spirit has imparted to us. There is a solidarity of purpose as we try to love God and follow Jesus together here, and this is something for us to really be thankful for because it allows us to move forward in God’s service together and to support one another as we do so.

St. Paul continues, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” When each one, like those two brothers in the opening story try to live in humility and put one another first, something beautiful happens as God’s Kingdom comes as a result of that laying aside of selfish ambition.

This brings us back to where we started after that opening story as St. Paul writes, “Let each of you look not only to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Then continuing into the part where St. Paul talks about Jesus emptying himself, St. Paul writes, “Have the same

mind in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, again emptied himself and took the form of a servant.

So, according to St. Paul, this is how to live the Christian life, by adopting the mind of Christ and to some degree emptying ourselves of our claim to our lives and deferring to Him.

Finally, St. Paul writes, “Work out your own salvation with fear trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

When he writes about working out our own salvation with fear and trembling, what I think he means by this is carefully and thoughtfully. Rather than jetting through life and being subject to all of our whims and ideas, it means making a conscious effort to have the mind of Christ and let the Holy Spirit form Christ’s love, His consolation, His compassion and His humility in us.

And perhaps the best news of the whole passage for you and me is found in those very last words where St. Paul assures us that “it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

You see, what that means, Beloved, is that progress in our spiritual life is not up to whatever faith, hope and love we might be able to muster up. Rather, “it is GOD who is at work in you and me, enabling us, empowering us both TO WILL and TO WORK for God’s good pleasure.

How good is that? Not only is God empowering us to WORK for God’s good pleasure, God is empowering us to WILL IT, to desire it, to yearn for it as God does.

We gather here each week to worship God together and we are blessed. But that is not where it ends. In fact, that is where it begins. You see, we are blessed to be blessing to others. We go out these doors each week blessed by God to be a blessing to others. That is our calling, blessed by God to bless the world and make it a better place.

So, we need not be surprised Beloved, when our hearts start to radically change and we begin to think new thoughts and have new ideas and desires which we never had before. Things start to bug us that never bugged us in the past like the injustices of this world regarding the poor and the marginalized, for example, and we find that we can no longer sit on these thoughts and ideas because we feel compelled to do what we can about affecting change in this world, change for the good. When that happens, we will know that it is God who has birthed these ideas within us and we will know that it is God who is at work in us enabling us, empowering us, coaching us both to will and to work for his good pleasure and in so doing making God's difference in this world through God's servants today.

May it be so in us, dear God. We pray that you would work your good pleasure in us each and every day of our lives. We thank you for blessing us so abundantly and pray that you would make us a blessing to others. And we ask this in the Name of your Son Jesus. AMEN.