

A BIG “IF”

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-13
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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(WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY)

In Philippians 2, the Apostle Paul wants to remind us of two very important, non-negotiable things that ought to characterize every church that names Christ as Lord.

Unity and humility.

I don't suspect many people would find these to emphases particularly exceptional. Yes, the church is supposed to be united. Yes, we're supposed to be humble. Ho hum. These are not particularly revelatory, even if we struggle to consistently make them a reality.

What's interesting is how Paul gets there. The passage begins with a big “if.” And it's followed a verse later by a “then.”

If/then.

In my first year logic class in philosophy we studied if/then statements. The formal term for these is “conditionals.”

If condition x is met, *then* outcome y will follow.

If the weather forecast is correct, *then* we will (incredibly) have snow tomorrow!

If my sermon goes forty-five minutes, *then* there might be an exodus out the back door.

If we receive \$60 000 in pledges, *then* we will proceed with our church building project (this conditional has happily been met!).

In my observation, conditionals account for roughly 90% of parenting. *If* you clean up your room, *then* you will get an ice cream cone. *If* you keep teasing your sister, *then* you will be served only broccoli for dinner. *If* you watch YouTube videos all day, *then* your brain will implode in upon itself.

We find conditionals throughout our daily lives. If you don't meet the early bird registration date, then you won't get the reduced rate. If you don't put winter tires on, then you'll slip around the roads all winter. If you don't exercise and eat properly, then you'll run into all kinds of health problems. Etc., etc.

Our passage today is a kind of a conditional. It's not an ironclad conditional of logic where *x* always and inevitably leads to *y*, but it's close.

What does Paul say?

If...

- you have any encouragement from being united with Christ
- you have any comfort from his love
- you have any common sharing in the Spirit
- you have any tenderness and compassion

Then...

- be like minded
- have the same love
- do nothing out of selfish ambition
- in humility, value others above yourself

Humility does not equal self-abasement. To value others above yourself does not imply a kind of divinely inspired self-loathing. It does not mean that we are to think of ourselves as worms or unworthy of love or acceptance or anything like that.

It *does* mean that we are to be consistently striving to be other-focused. We are to resist the me-first mentality that pervades our individualistic and consumeristic culture. We are to crucify our tendencies to exalt ourselves at the expense of others.

So, if I were to shorten the conditionals of Philippians 2 into one statement, I might put it like this.

If, dear church, Jesus and his way mean anything at all to you, then you will be united and you will be humble.

Unity and humility. This is what Paul holds up for the church in Philippi and for us today.

Sometimes, it's interesting to look at conditionals in reverse.

If poor Johnny is staring forlornly at a plate full of broccoli for dinner, *then* he must have insisted upon teasing his sister.

If I am preaching to an empty sanctuary, *then* chances are I've droned on too long.

And *if* the church is not particularly unified or humble, *then...* well, then what?

I regularly hear laments about how apathetic and divided and conflicted the church in the West is. I regularly see evidence of how Christians can behave with a lack of humility and charity toward one another (particularly online).

We sometimes see this in our own Mennonite church, where we *have* divided and *continue* to divide over controversial issues, where we seek to impose the rightness of our own views at the expense of others (this is true of both conservatives and liberals).

If we think of Jesus as the bulls-eye in an archery target and the various doctrines that the church thinks differently as the outer rings, it seems to me that we often major on the outer rings of the archery target while neglecting the center.

So we know that the church does not always do humility and unity very well.

If this is true—and I realize that I am painting with very broad strokes, here—but *if* it's even partially, true, what does this say about us?

Is it possible that when we fail at unity and humility we do *not* in fact have much encouragement from being united with Christ?

That we do *not*, in fact, have much comfort from his love?

That we do *not*, in fact, have common sharing in the Spirit?

That we do *not*, in fact have much tenderness or compassion for our sisters and brothers or for our neighbours more broadly?

Like I said earlier, Paul's conditional is not an ironclad one like those in logic. But it's worth thinking about, isn't it?

Is Jesus kind of just an insurance policy for the afterlife?

Do we struggle to believe that Jesus really *does* love us and that we are to share in his love?

Do tenderness and compassion hardly seem worth the effort?

Is it possible that Jesus really just doesn't matter very much to us?

These are sobering things to contemplate. But I think Scripture always holds up a mirror to us and we should not shy away from looking squarely at it.

Unity and humility should be the logical outcome of a church that has been touched by Jesus. The encouragement and comfort and tenderness and compassion that we have received *from* Christ ought to flow out to one another as an expression of our devotion *to* Christ.

And they do. It's easy to focus on the church's failures, on the times when we are not exactly bearers of good news to the world. But there are other stories, too.

Last night I participated in a service at St. Augustine's Anglican Church to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. A few people from our church were also there.

1517 was the year that Martin Luther famously nailed his 95 theses of debate to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral, kick starting the Reformation. Mennonites took a few more decades to arrive on the scene, and we weren't particularly appreciated by either the first Protestants or the Catholic Church, but we trace our heritage to the same impulses of reexamining the faith and departing from the established church.

We've come a long way since 1517. In the centuries after the Reformation began, there was all kinds of religiously fuelled violence and overheated rhetoric and excommunications and counter-excommunications. Our ancestors were hunted down and killed by both Protestants and Catholics for our views on baptism and war and links between church and state. It was not a time when the church lived well with difference.

And many of you can remember deep suspicions of other denominations in your own lifetimes. Even a handful of decades ago, the idea of Mennonites worshiping with Roman Catholics and Lutherans and Anglicans and the United Church would have been unheard of.

And yet there we were last night, many denominations celebrating our common faith. This is real progress!

At one point in the service, I had a chance to lead everyone gathered in the Apostles Creed, this ancient statement of the basic truths of Christianity that we all share. Imagine—a Mennonite pastor leading Lutherans and Catholics and Anglicans in professing our shared faith. It would have been impossible mere decades ago, never mind five hundred years ago!

At another point in the service, representatives of the various churches brought a pitcher of water to the front where they were all poured into a common basin. It was meant to symbolize the truth that we are all baptized into the same Christ.

We don't all do it in the same way. We don't all have the same theology behind it. But we all do it in the same name: the name of Jesus.

Afterward, the water was placed in a tool called an "aspergillum" (I didn't even know this word before last night). It's basically a long tool with a cup on the end of it for sprinkling water. A few of the clergy walked around the sanctuary flinging drops of

water on those present (I noticed a few surprised looks from those unfamiliar with this practice, when the drops of water were flying through the air!).

But it was a powerful image. The mixed and mingled waters of our shared baptism falling upon all of us.

After the service, the water from the basin was poured back into our jugs and we each brought them back to our church full of the “mixed up” waters of all our different denominations. It’s sitting on the table in front of me right now.

Another story. On Friday night, Naomi and I spent some time with Feras and Lana and their family. They showed us pictures of their church in Syria, before and after it was bombed. They showed us the place they got married. They showed us other famous Orthodox churches in Syria, some nestled into spectacular mountains, some elaborate complexes filled with ornate icons and lavish rooms.

Around their house were numerous statues and icons and pictures of patron saints for this or that church from this or that region. At one point, I tried to explain to them where and when Mennonites arrived on the scene (some 1500 years after their church began!). I think they understood. I looked at the pictures of the saints on their wall and said, “And Mennonites don’t really have any saints.” They smiled. And then Lana said, “It doesn't matter, we are family. Same Jesus.”

This struck me as about as eloquent an expression of what Paul is advocating that I could think of. Same Jesus. No matter how we differ—and Mennonite and Syrian Orthodox worship is about as far apart on the Christian spectrum as you could hope to imagine!—... “same Jesus.” We are family.

These stories give me hope for the future of this big broad family of faith that we call the church. They counteract some of the negativity that floats around about the many shortcomings of the church.

And my prayer is that these glimpses of unity and humility in the broader church can serve as an inspiration for our live together in this church, Lethbridge Mennonite Church.

We have differences here, too. We don’t all think the same. We don’t all have the same views on this or that theological doctrine or practice. But it’s the same Jesus.

If, dear church, Jesus and his way mean anything at all to us, then we will be united and we will be humble.

Amen.

