

Rejoice in the Lord
Philippians 4:1-9

In any given church, you will probably discover disputes, conflict, and worry. For those in leadership positions, it can be disturbing as well as energy draining. This often causes the congregation to be less than their best for ministry and mission.

St. Paul knew that the church at Philippi was afflicted with a struggle in several areas. The church was dogged by outside pressure from the '*circumcision faction*' those Christians who believed male converts had to be circumcised, as we saw in last Sunday's sermon. (Philippians 1:15-17).

Then there were those who argued about the how and when of Jesus' second coming. Remember that St. Paul has said "The Lord is Near." He had to deal with conflict within the churches from the beginning. Some church members believed that Jesus would return any day while others believed that they should prepare until Jesus returned by spreading the Gospel, growing spiritually, and serving everyone.

Euodia and Syntyche serve as an illustration of the tension between believers over the issue of the return of Jesus. These two women were seasoned disciples and faithful believers who had been with Jesus from the beginning. However, St. Paul is so troubled by the conflict between these two that he asks for help from some loyal believers.

Why was this such a big deal for St. Paul? Stuff happens, right? Because for Paul the critical testimony of the transforming power of the love and grace of Jesus was God's power to reconcile people, Jew and Gentile, slave and free.

St. Paul's point returns again and again. Four times he asks the church at Philippi to be of the same mind. "*Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind*" (2:2). In chapter 3: "*Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you*" (3:15). And in our text for today, "*I urge Euodia, and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord*" (4:2). "*Make my joy complete,*" he says in the second chapter.

St. Paul trumpets a core belief of the church: practicing tough love to live, work, and serve together with the mind of Jesus. It's not that we all have to think the same way or have the same discernment. There is always space for creative tension, discussion, and negotiation. Paul believes that in the Church of Jesus we can love patiently and persistently until the conflict gives birth to a new level of love. Giving up on each other is never an option. We struggle together, listen together, and walk in one another's shoes.

St. Paul lays it out there: "*Therefore, my beloved ... work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure*" (2:12-13).

St. Paul pleads with the companions of the congregation, "*Help these women.*" I pray that this would be our modus operandi when we experience tension and conflict. Instead, we sometimes pretend it is not there, or we project it onto something else. While its true that wine gets better when it ages. Conflict, not so much.

I believe Paul wanted the leaders of the church to confront Euodia and Syntyche, sit with them, pray with them, help them, and whatever time it takes, come to a better place of rejoicing in God. Somewhere between 1682-1685, Henry Purcell wrote the anthem entitled "*Rejoice in the Lord, Always*" based on Philippians 4: "*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*" (4:4-7).

Were he alive today I believe St. Paul would say our church's hearts and minds need to be grace controlled. Instead of being weakened by dysfunctional behavior we need to be strengthened by feeding the hungry children and youth of our neighborhoods. Jesus lived, died, and was raised for God to redeem humanity and the physical world.

St. Paul reminds us that the church, you and I, ought to be able to meet and resolve any challenge that we face, if we have the mind of 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. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross" (2:6-8).

If we live as Jesus did and give up our pride, spitefulness, and smallness then God will 'exalt' us. . *"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (4:7). Alleluia. Amen*