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## Something We Can All Agree On

I want to focus this week on the excerpt from Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, the first reading that Patricia read for us this morning. Paul's letter allows us to continue on this theme that we have been exploring for a few weeks: what it means to be the church, this alternative community, this alternative reality I have been talking about with you.

What we know about this letter is that it is written sometime between the year 50 and the year 60, while Paul is in prison, we don't know exactly where—he was imprisoned several times for his work spreading the gospel. The church at Philippi had been founded by Paul—his first church on European soil—around the year 50, and it was made up mostly of gentiles. Philippi was at that time a Roman colony, a place where retired soldiers were given land. As always in Paul's letters, we are dealing with the first generation of Christians, the first generation of people trying to be church.

Not surprisingly, for those of us who have any experience whatsoever of church, the early church had its problems and challenges; and while we don't learn from this letter what specific problems or challenges Paul was responding to, we do get the sense that it has something to do with *unity*.

Right there, in the first generation of church, they found something to fight

about! Perhaps this should be a comfort to us—it's always been this way in the church. Unity, for Christians, is always a work in progress.

Today when conflict arises in the church we often turn to methods of conflict resolution or mediation, and we often bring in an outside, third party to help us resolve our differences. That's a little bit like what's going on here, with Paul as the outside consultant. So let's see what we can learn from Paul's response to this early church dispute.

The first thing to notice is that Paul here doesn't describe the opposing positions, and what they are doing. He doesn't urge them toward some kind of compromise or middle ground.

Instead of focusing on their differences, and what it would take to bridge them, Paul focuses on what they all have in common: their faith in Jesus Christ. He reminds them of a song that they would have known by heart. It's right there in the middle of the reading, verses 6 to 11, a very ancient hymn about Jesus, maybe the very first Christian hymn:

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.*

*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.*

Paul is drawing the focus of the Philippians—perhaps especially that of the singers amongst them—to the source of their unity, and away from the things that divide them. He's helping them to make a distinction between the things that central, the things that are core to being Christian community, and those things that are matters of taste and preference, but not core to our identity as Christians.

This is a recurring theme for Paul as he spreads the gospel across the vast, multicultural, multiethnic Mediterranean world of his time: this interplay between our God-given diversity of languages, cultures, identities, personalities, tastes, preferences, and needs; and the thing, the one thing, that draws us together into this particular kind of community, the church.

Paul, it seems to me, is always concerned with the question of how much our other identities—our gender, our occupation, how wealthy or poor we are, our political affiliations—how much these impact our Christian identity and the life of the church. For Paul the answer is simple: our Christian identity trumps all our other identities. It's not that it erases them, or negates them, or denigrates them: it's just that it puts them in perspective.

In other letters, Paul addresses wives and husbands, and urges them to be *Christian* wives and husbands in their marriages; he challenges masters—slaveholders—to be Christians first and to consider what that means for their interactions with their servants and slaves. All of our various identities are shaped and reformed by our Christian identity.

The same goes for our other identities and affiliations, whether our political leanings, our generational cohort, our ethnic background; right down to our tastes and preferences in worship or music. Coming from all our diverse places, Paul wants us to adopt a common mindset, the mind of Christ, and for that to guide our interactions in the church and elsewhere.

The key aspect of this for Paul is humility, the kind of humility we see in the story of Jesus in that ancient hymn: though he was God, he became a slave, descended to the bottom of the heap, to raise us all up, to reconcile us to God.

We are to be like Jesus, Paul says: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as

better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

This is part of that countercultural, alternative reality I keep talking about. How the church is very unlike the world.

What makes us unique and distinct from the world is that we gather around this story that makes no sense in the eyes of the world: a story of how God, the power of the universe, willingly became a slave, submitted himself to indignities, humiliations, and finally the most humiliating form of execution, death on a cross—all for the purpose of rescuing us, saving us, from the consequences of our foolishness and our selfishness, all of the array of things we might file under the general category of Sin.

We gather around this story, and we take it to be the truth, in the midst of a world that so desperately wants to believe other stories instead. We live in a world that is disconcertingly divided, seemingly more so every week: divisions over race, between the political left and right, and between competing identity groups.

Politicians offer slogans about making their societies or nations “great,” but the proposals they offer appeal to fear, self-interest, and greed, and their implementation would come at the cost of great harm to the most vulnerable in our world: the poor, refugees, the sick, people of colour. The very people God in Jesus came and pitched his tent with. We have a better story.

During my studies I read a book that comes from the world of business,

called *Good to Great* by Jim Collins. At the heart of the book is what Collins calls the “hedgehog concept.” He says that every organization, to be successful, needs to have a hedgehog concept, which he defines as the thing that you have to offer that no one else is offering. For the church, the story of Jesus is our hedgehog concept. Jesus is our hedgehog!

The world offers a whole variety of stories as to what makes a nation great, or an organization great, or even what makes a church great. As people who live in the world, we are naturally influenced by all of those messages; they help to form our identities, and the ways we approach life. Naturally, we bring all of that with us into our life in the church.

But the gift of the church—our precious hedgehog—is a story more powerful than all those other stories, and an identity that is deeper, stronger, truer, than any other identity you may have walked in the doors with today.

Our opportunity as we participate in the life of the church is to loosen the grip of some of those other identities and stories, the ways we have been formed in the world, and to allow ourselves to be reformed by this particular story, the story of Jesus, the gospel, a story in which we, by the grace of God, have been invited to participate.

Let us pray:<sup>1</sup>

“One God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, help us to be honest about our divisions and the separations that afflict our church. At the same time, give us the grace not to allow those divisions to

determine the nature or life of our church.

O Lord who brings together all things, reconciling humanity to you and also reconciling us to each other, give us the gift of reconciliation, that we may banish all hatred and prejudice, all pride and rancor, and anything that hinders us from holy unity and friendship in your name.

This we pray in your name—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, so that we might be all of one heart and one soul, and with one voice we might glorify you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Will Willimon, Pulpit Resource.