

Philippians 2 : 1 – 13

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 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. 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.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own 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.

Romans 14: 7 – 13

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

So then, each of us will be accountable to God. Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.

It is a blessing to me every week to stand here and speak to the English-speaking congregation. Today I am doubly blessed to be speaking to all of the people of Linda Vista United Methodist Church!

It is a special time when we come together to worship and pray and have fellowship together as one congregation. Thank you all for coming this morning to share this time.

To my knowledge, there are at least five languages and at least three dialects spoken by the people in this room. That makes it hard for us to communicate at times. We don't always understand each other. We don't always pronounce each other's names correctly.

We can't always remember names because they are unfamiliar to us. We can't always express ourselves easily.

And that can lead to misunderstandings, to hurt feelings, and to avoiding each other.

We are not only different individuals, we are from different cultures and different backgrounds. Those factors mean that different things are important to us, and that we understand life differently. We don't always agree on how to clean the church, how to worship, or how to be the church.

Some of us are called to go out and help the poor and needy, while others of us are called to pray or cook for each other or lead Bible studies or any of many other things.

Sometimes we want other people to think the same things are important that we do. Sometimes we don't understand why other people don't do the same things we do to serve God. And then a really bad thing sometimes happens----

We don't even try to understand. We stop listening to each other. We start judging each other.

The people in Rome and in Philippi had similar problems. People from all over the known world came to Rome, and Philippi is very close to western Asia, making it a kind of crossroads for the continents of Europe and Asia. Many different languages and many different cultures were represented in this area of the world.

There were many opportunities for misunderstanding and for judging each other. There were many challenges to getting along and agreeing on things.

Paul addressed this problem. He said "Some people eat meat and others do not, but whatever they do, they are doing it because they love God. Whatever people do, if they do it because they love God, it's okay.

Don't judge what other people do. Don't get in their way. Just love God the best way you can and let other people love God the best way they can."

In the multicultural world of Paul's time, and in the multicultural world of our time, this is good news! We don't have to live up to the expectations of others or obey the rules set down by others. We just have to love God the best way we can!

Whatever we do, we must do whatever brings us closer to God. Making rules for ourselves or others does not bring us closer to God.

It doesn't help us to love our neighbors better when we judge them.

In the letter to the Ephesians, we read that Christ has broken down all barriers between us and that Christ is our unity!

So then why are we still divided?

It's because we are paying attention to human things, not to Christ.

If we focus on Christ, we can't see our differences any more. We can only see Christ! What is important is Christ, not what is different between us!

Let's reflect on this for a minute.

What is the Good News, the gospel of Jesus Christ, for you? For you, personally?

Don't settle for an answer that you learned in Sunday School.

Don't think about what someone else thinks the answer is.

What is so good about the Gospel of Jesus Christ for you, in your life?

What need did you have that was met by getting to know

Jesus Christ? Did you need to be forgiven? Did you long for

justice? Was it God's grace that was needed in your life? Did

you need to feel that someone loved you, no matter what?

Were you lonely and in need of knowing that someone was with

you even in the darkest night?

I want you to think about it, to understand exactly what your

need for God was, and what it still is.

Now, reflect on how that need has come out of your experiences, your background, your culture, your circumstances.

That need came out of your life, your unique experiences, and so the way that the gospel is important to you is also unique.

Your relationship with Christ is yours alone. Each person has their own relationship, their own understanding, their own need for Christ, their own need for God.

And since no two people have the same exact relationship with Christ, we cannot say that any two people have the same way of serving God, of showing their love for God, of loving their neighbor.

No two people think about God the same way, because God meets each of us where we are and fills the individual needs that we all have.

God is infinite, big enough to be all things to all people,
and whatever it is you need, God fills that need.

Think of it this way-----some holes are square, some are round.
Some holes are deep and narrow. Others are broad and
shallow.

Whatever shape the hole in your heart is, God is exactly
that shape. God exactly fits that hole. So God comes in many
different shapes and sizes, and fills our individual needs.

The way that God has answered your own specific need is the
Good News, the gospel, for you!

What has God done for you? Praise God for love and mercy
and grace and for all that he has done in your life!

So far I have talked about our own individual needs, but we as a congregation, as joint congregations, have needs as the Linda Vista United Methodist Church in addition to our own personal needs.

We need, as a church, as a community, as a fellowship of believers, to find the ways in which we can be in ministry to each other and to the world beyond our doors. We need to understand our strengths and weaknesses as a group, and we need to listen to each other to understand what direction we need to be going together.

I see many ways that people in this place are called to serve. I see people who have a heart for the poor and the needy. I see people who have a heart for studying the scriptures.

I see people who are called to teach, people who are called to make music, and people who are called to encourage. I see people who are serving in administrative roles and people who are serving God by keeping this place of worship clean and making it beautiful. And God is glad for these ministries!

I also see people who have needs, people who are hurting, who are yearning, who are searching. People who want to keep their sadness, their loneliness, their fears private, not wanting to bother or worry others or to admit weakness. Some of us are not willing, for whatever reason, to ask for the help that we need, even here at church, among our friends and families.

God is sad for these people, and he is ready to fill those needs.

Maybe the problem is that we not only need to ask for help, to admit to each other that we have a need, but maybe God is waiting for us to be the hands and feet and heart of Christ and work to fill those needs for each other.

That's why God made us different. It's difficult at times to be different. We can't understand. We disagree. We want to serve God in different ways.

But if we were all the same, having the same needs and the same gifts for love and service, who would meet our needs?

Our differences and our needs fit together like jigsaw puzzle pieces. Our strengths and our weaknesses fit together, making a complete picture, a picture of God's people, all loving and worshipping and serving and praising God together!

And despite the differences in languages, in culture, and in beliefs, we can all praise God together!

Our scripture reading from Phillipians this morning tells us that “every knee shall bend and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord!” and our reading from Romans echoes it, saying, “As I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

No matter what our differences are, God has done great things for us as individuals and also as a church! We shall all praise God for all of the many blessings he has given us, for the many ways that we are different, and for bringing us together as Linda Vista United Methodist Church.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow! Praise God!
Praise Christ! And let our hearts overflow with praise and thanksgiving!

Amen!