

October 9 Getting Along with Others – -- An Imperative

I don't like confrontation. As a pastor, it doesn't come naturally to me. Oh, I talk a good game. But when it actually comes to confronting some struggling brother or sister in the church, I stumble. I'd rather avoid it.

You can imagine my discomfort in reading the lesson and finding Paul confronting two people, who are causing a ruckus in the church.

For three chapters of his letter to the Philippians, Paul talks about everything but the problem. He thanks God for the faith of their church. He speaks of his own imprisonment. He discusses the necessity of Christian joy and peace. He quotes a hymn. And finally, near the end, blurts out, "I urge Euodia and Syntyche to agree in the Lord."

Picture Paul, pacing the floor, dictating this letter, speaking of this and that, quoting scripture, a few lines of a hymn, until he finally gets the nerve to say what he wanted to say all along: Euodia! Syntyche! Agree in the Lord! You know how people beat around the bush, talk about the weather, football, the price of tires, until finally they get to the point, to what they were working up the courage to say. Well, it took Paul 70 verses before he finally got to the problem that was on his mind!

"I urge Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." He goes on to ask the church members to assist these women in coming together, and then compliments both of them: *"I ask you ... to help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life."* (4:1-9)

These women are, undoubtedly, leaders of the church. The church at Philippi had always been led by women. In Acts we learn that a prominent businesswoman named Lydia had gotten the church started in her home. The church owes a lot to these women.

A criticism of Paul is that he has picked a poor place to discuss this sort of problem. Why has Paul besmirched a perfectly fine, poetic, uplifting epistle by airing the dirty laundry of First Church Philippi? Is this the time or the place to set Euodia and Syntyche straight? Doesn't Paul do counseling? Is

the pulpit the place for personal confrontations with these two good women?

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One Monday morning, a pastor encountered the minister of another church walking down the street with a glum look on his face. *"What's wrong with you?"*

"Well, it got ugly at church last night. The church council was downright nasty to me."

"I'm sorry, What happened?"

"They got upset with me because, during the sermon, I happened to mention that George Jones was committing adultery. And he caused a terrible fuss and people were very rude to me."

"You said this in the sermon?"

"Well, I said it in love."

I expect that pastor's love didn't make much difference to George Jones. And I expect that Paul's tone of voice didn't make much difference to Euodia and Syntyche.

I wouldn't blame Euodia and Syntyche if they walked out mumbling "*Some preachers just have the worst sense of occasion.*"

Like the preacher whose Mothers Day sermon was on abortion.

But perhaps, these women knew that, in addressing them, in not only confronting but also ministering to their differences, Paul is asserting the very purpose of the church.

Enough of such pettiness, you say, let's get on with church!

But why are we in the church? Because this, we believe, is the form that the risen Christ has chosen to take in the world. We are the body of Christ, the place where Christ has chosen to be present. Paul's genius is standing in one particular place, like a congregation, with everyday, ordinary people beside us, and seeing the very presence of Christ in their midst.

Paul sees, not the bothersome squabblers, but sees saints. That's what he calls them, saints. "*God is at work in you,*" he tells them.

Why is it the church so often seems superficial and petty?

It's really not that our disagreements about how to live together are superficial and petty. But we can't go beyond our differences if we don't honestly talk about them, so we bring up our disagreements.

We'll never see the saintliness of people like Euodia and Syntyche if we never really deal with them. Paul preached to them in front of the whole church because he expected the whole church to help with the healing.

In the church, the little things really do make a difference, because it's in the little things that we get our glimpses of the kingdom. Church is where we get training in how to live with one another like Christians so that, if we get good enough at it we might live like Christians in the world.

The kingdom of God rises and falls on what happens between two disagreeing sisters; on how well, or poorly, we are able to embody, in our everyday, ordinary little lives, the love of Christ.

I think that's why Paul saves his words for these women until the end of his letter -- not as delayed, but necessary -- not as something that he had tried every way not to say, but finally had to say -- Rather, he saved his word for them until the end because it was the point of every word, every prayer, every hymn, every theological assertion in his letter: By the grace of God, in the light of Christ's love, Euodia and Syntyche not only must **but can agree** in the Lord.

If they cannot be honest with one another and still remain sisters in the Lord, then all the great assertions about Christ coming to us, suffering on the cross, rising from the dead, just don't amount to much.

The world is quite right in assuming that it ought to be able to look at the church people and see people who look different. There is only one church, the one where you live, the place where ordinary people like you, like I, make visible what we believe has happened in the life and death of Jesus.

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So Paul's advice to those two sisters is directed to us too.

I urge you all to be of the same mind in the Lord.

We're called to have the *mind of Christ* - His humble attitude - his way of *thinking and looking at people*.

In the remainder of the reading Paul explains how those two sisters - and the rest of us - can be of the same mind in the Lord.

He says rejoice in the Lord always, pray with both supplications - requests - and words of thanks, and then, to let our minds focus on "*whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable ... and ... anything worthy of praise.*"

Knowing the importance of our thoughts, Paul urges us to set our minds on the right things -- To give a positive, constructive direction to our minds.

Deliberately shape your mind and strengthen your inner resources through prayer and Bible study – memorize Bible verses and listen to Christian music - sing the hymns and songs of the service, that those good words might be implanted in your minds.

At the end of that list, he adds these words: "*think about these things.*"

If we were to stop reading Paul's letter right there, we might conclude that all he was attempting to do was to give his readers "*something to think about,*" but, in fact, Paul does not stop there. He adds, "Keep on **doing** these things." In terms of thinking, he was telling them to fill their minds with virtuous concepts and high-quality motivations, but he went on to say that they should *do* them too - put it into practice - they should express their high-minded ideals in words and deeds. We should embody to love of Christ

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Shape your thoughts and let them shape your actions; train your mind so that you begin to have the attitude of Christ, so then your words and deeds will be more Christ-like.

As you shape your heart and mind, you will have a **new mental attitude** and feel closer to the Lord.

And with that comes **inner strength** -- peace and joy *in your heart that transcends circumstances* – an inner strength that nothing can take away, and you will have a solid anchor for your life.

Have the mind of Christ, and trust in His power - there is no problem that is too big for the Lord. Look at your problem *through His eyes* and thus gain a new perspective.

Have the mind of Christ

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The peace of God -- **an inner strength** that **comes from shaping** our thoughts and directing them to the Lord.