

Humility

Essay 6 in the series “Ode to Joy”

Paul in his letter to the Philippians now turns his attention to what is always at the heart of good news, of church, of spiritual success in any form, and that is humility (Philippians 2:1-4). This follows directly from Paul’s appeal to the believers in Philippi that they “stand firm in one Spirit” (1:27). It’s important, I think, to review what he meant by this. Paul is here speaking of “standing firm in one Spirit, contending as one for the faith of the gospel.” Too often, at least in recent centuries, texts like this have been used to suggest that we must all be identical in our doctrine and practice or we cannot be in fellowship or communion with one another.

This raises for us the definition of unity – whether unity under God is unity as uniformity or unity in diversity. Now in the church at first, there was substantial diversity. In its very Scripture, there were multiple perspectives. Certainly the church of the second century was incredibly diverse. And if the emperor Constantine tried to enforce uniformity in the fourth century, he substantially failed. For over a 1000 years the church saw itself as one but there was a remarkable range of diversity in its doctrine, practice and organization.

The church was one but it was unity in diversity, not unity as uniformity. It had no apparatus to structure itself in any other way. That is, until in the eleventh century the Papacy now armed with the tools of canon law and a near monopoly on education sought to impose uniformity across Europe, an effort that reached its climax at the Fourth Lateran Council in Rome in 1215 under Pope Innocent III. Innocent III was a formidable man, a medieval monarch in the fullest sense of the word. And when his great council determined that only those whose faith and practice were identical with that of the Church of Rome could be in fellowship with the Church of Rome, he had redefined unity as uniformity, as exact uniformity in doctrine and practice. And when 300 years later Protestant groups broke away from the Church of Rome, they carried with them Innocent III’s definition of unity, unity as uniformity, so that those in fellowship must think and act the same. The inevitable consequence was division over and over and over again, and all the sadness and fear and eventual violence that goes with it.

Now to know that there was something wrong with this – and to begin to see the answer, a way back to unity, a way back to religious sanity – we just have to go back to how it is that people come to faith. The way it works even in most churches today is that one gets their belief right and their behavior “straightened out.” And then they get to belong. Then the church accepts them. But is that really how people come to faith in God? What if belonging comes first, then changed behavior, then beliefs that follow from belonging and behavior?

What if as Diana Butler Bass does in her recent book *Christianity after Religion* we go back to the beginning, back to Jesus, and ask in what order people came to Jesus? Think about it. Jesus, you may remember, didn’t go around and find some people who had their

doctrine and behavior all squared away and then allow them to belong, appointed them apostles. What he did do was walk along the Sea of Galilee and invite first this fisherman and then that, and then a tax collector, to “Follow me.” So maybe it all began with belonging. And then what? Jesus’ followers didn’t sit around a fire and listen to lectures on doctrine, did they? No, they listened to stories that taught them how to behave, how to best act in this world, and they learned to take care of the sick, to feed the hungry, to pray, to wash feet, to serve, to love, to forgive.

And this belonging and behavior opened up for them a whole new vision of God, a whole new experience of God in this world. And so from belonging and behavior came beliefs that made sense in the light of their new-found belonging and behavior. They came over time to see: that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself not counting people’s sins against them, that this living God is the Savior of all people, and that we live in a world lit by resurrection and open to the Spirit of this God, an enchanted and enchanting world where grace reigns, where somehow in absolutely all things God works for our good, and so our very lives expand and fill to the measure of all the fullness of God. And with this, they came to joy, to unshakeable joy, to radiant unshakeable joy, and also with this came unity in one Spirit.

So, yes, Paul cares deeply that the believers in Philippi stand firm in one Spirit. There was, we will see later in this letter, some murmuring and bickering going on – even in this good church. And now in 2:1-4 Paul begins to describe how they could stand firm in one Spirit. He begins with some “if” clauses that are best understood in context as presuppositions. What I want us to see now is the heart of Paul. I want us to empathize with what a pastoral heart goes through. So let’s listen to his heart as he writes this, as if he were saying this directly to us: “Since you have this encouragement in Christ – life in God is good, the gospel is amazing; since you have this comfort, this reassurance from his love; since you have this fellowship, this sharing, with the Spirit of God; since you live and breathe by the same Spirit; since you have this tenderness and compassion – just think through what is tender and compassionate; then make my joy complete. Complete my joy. Yes, I know of the joy I have in Christ, but my love for you is such that if you’re not alright, I’m not alright. Not quite. My joy is bound up with how you’re doing. It’s bound up in your standing firm in one Spirit. So make my joy complete by being like-minded, by setting your mind on the same things, by caring about the same things – that God comes first in your life, nothing else and no one else, that we find God radiantly revealed in Jesus, and that we experience God in the Spirit all around us and in us. Make my joy complete by having the same love for one another, by being one in spirit and purpose, that is, in soul and mind, not that you all think exactly the same things but that you are one with your whole being, devoted to one another. Do nothing out of selfish ambition, out of pure self-interest. If you do, everything begins to unravel. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, empty glory. Don’t be full of yourself and what you know and what you’ve done and what you’re maybe going to do. But in humility consider others better, more important, than yourselves, each of you not looking out for your own concerns but for the concerns of others, caring more for the needs of others than even your own.”

With this Paul raises the matter of humility which is – catch this! – almost uniquely a Christian virtue, especially in the Greco-Roman world where humility was considered not a virtue but a failing. To a victorious Caesar, we offer a crucified Messiah. Rather than standing on our own strength and insisting on our own agenda, we put our hope in God, trusting God, and depending on God. And with regard to one another, we consider one another better than ourselves, more important than ourselves, with needs every bit as important as ours.

We are always aware of our own limitations. We are always to open to learning from one another. Every time we suppose that we're "the smartest guy in the room," we think again. (Is there anything less joyful than being in a room with the smartest guy in the world, unless it's being in a room with two or three of them?) Every time we want to force our way of thinking on others, we think again. And so we serve one another. We become the servants of all. We wash feet. We take out the garbage. We clean up after one another. We take care of one another. And then when we recognize our own limits and fully realize our dependence on God and on God's grace, there begins to come into our lives a deep sense of soul relief, of freedom, the first hints of the joy Paul speaks of. But no pretension. No grandstanding. No play-acting. No claim to special goodness. No claim to special brilliance. No claim to special anything. Just emptying ourselves so that God might fill us.

So we are called to this humility that preserves unity and creates joy, to this humility that considers others better than ourselves, that looks not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others. One can only imagine what might happen if we did this – if we were to rethink and reorder our lives in terms of our deep, abiding spiritual relationships with one another. One can only imagine. No, we can do more than imagine.

– Dale Pauls