

**MINISTRY BY MAIL**  
**Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship**  
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**Twenty-First Sunday After Trinity, October 20, 2024**

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)  
Hymns: 464, 471:6, 481, 478, 366:5-6.  
Lessons: Psalm 133, 1 Corinthians 1:10-25, John 17:6-23.  
Sermon Text: Philippians 2:1-5.  
Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Perhaps you, too, have met people who have bluntly told you “I go to such and such a church, but I don’t believe everything they teach.” or even “I’m a member of such and such a church, but I don’t agree with everything my church teaches.”

But do you remember what God says about unity? We read in First Corinthians chapter 1: ***“I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.”*** (1 Corinthians 1:10, NIV84) We recognize that Bible teaching as the foundation of what we call church fellowship.

God requires and urges unity, believing the same things, oneness, the same mind, thinking the same things, agreeing, in our congregations. That is most important in doctrine and practice, and in application of the Word of God. But it is great also if it extends to the temporal, earthly doings of the congregation. Which of us hasn’t heard of church divisions and splits over things like the color of the carpet in the church?

Paul’s message, the message of the Word of God, today addresses the oneness, the unity that should be part of a Christian congregation. Today we see the Word of God encouraging us to

**LIVE IN HARMONY AND HUMILITY WITH ONE ANOTHER.**

1. **Believers are to be “like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.”**
2. **“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.”**
3. **“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”**

Scripture is encouraging the Philippians and us and reminding us of the encouragement, the comfort, the fellowship the Holy Spirit provides, and the feelings that Christians have for one another. To emphasize what should be the attitudes, feelings and actions of Christians – especially for one another, the Apostle Paul points to the humility of Christ.

Paul wrote in the first chapter of his short letter to the congregation in Phillipi ***“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”*** (Philippians 1:27, NIV84) Then he goes on and points out that if the Philippians and other believers are to stand firm against the enemies of the gospel that threaten them from outside the congregation, they must first be firmly united among themselves.

Paul has already spoken of ***“standing firm in one spirit.”*** (Philippians 1:24, NIV84) Now he expands on that idea, and writes about the matter of believers’ relationships with one another. His approach is to use the Gospel, not the Law. His appeal here is thoroughly evangelical, gospel-based. The Gospel is the only thing that can bring anyone to faith, and the Gospel must be the words we look to in order for our faith to grow

We read four short “if” statements: ***“If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion.”*** In this way, Paul reminds the Philippians – and us – that they – and we – have been encouraged by Christ and comforted by his love. We have been made spiritually new and alive by the Holy Spirit’s work in the heart and

blessed by the Spirit with the gifts of tenderness and compassion. And, of course, these “if” statements assume and recognize that Christians have been blessed in this way.

Because Christians suffer from the enemies of Christ, they will need these things from their brethren: admonition and encouragement –comfort – true spiritual fellowship – and everything that tender mercies and compassions can give us. And the source of all these things is Christian love, the love of God for us. The society in which Paul lived and wrote these words placed little value on lowliness. In fact, it regarded it as the equivalent of cowardice and equated pride and self-assertiveness with manhood. The non-Christian world today thinks in the same way. People today are always “looking out for number one” – yourself – first! But the attitude of a heart changed by God’s grace is no longer “me first and everybody else after me, if at all.” Rather it is an attitude that humbly and lovingly places the interests of others before one’s own.

The fellowship of clinging close to one another in the face of the hatred of opponents is necessary, but this must have its source in the Spirit and be genuine fellowship. As such it will consist of tender mercies and love to bind up every wound.

Paul wrote to the Romans: **“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.”** (Romans 12:10, NIV84) **“In honor preferring one another.”** (KJV) Each child of God is to put every other brother first and himself last. The child of the world reverses this: he comes first, everyone else comes last, perhaps does not count at all.

If you have received these gifts from the Holy Spirit – and which believer in Jesus Christ as Savior has not received these gifts? Paul writes **“then make my joy complete”** He wants to be happy –and joyful for the Philippians, joyful for all Christians, and joyful for you, even though he does not yet know you personally.

The Philippians had already brought much joy to the apostle. Their partnership in the gospel, their faith and love, their generosity all brought him joy every time he thought about them or prayed for them. But there was one more thing the Philippians could strive to do, Paul says, that would truly make his joy complete. That one thing was to seek a greater measure of harmony in their dealings and relationships with one another, **“by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose”**.

Were pride and internal strife problems for the Philippian Congregation? Perhaps. Later on, in chapter 4, the apostle mentions a specific personal rivalry between two of the congregation’s prominent women. But whether more such problems existed in the congregation or not, the apostle felt that the Philippians needed encouragement in this particular area of their Christian lives.

And what congregation doesn’t need encouragement? Where sinners are living and working together with sinners, pride and selfishness are always rearing their ugly heads. The devil works particularly hard among Christians and within Christians, who, of course, are not sinless. After all, he has everyone else under his control. And if we think of Satan working among Christians, we think of our own congregations. The devil wants to use each person’s sinful nature to disrupt the congregation’s work through disharmony and strife.

And it is always characteristic of human nature to minimize one’s own weaknesses and to exaggerate one’s own strengths, while doing just the opposite when looking at the weaknesses and strengths of others. These things can severely hinder the spiritual growth of any congregation.

The Apostle Paul regarded the selfishness and pride which disrupt congregational harmony as particularly troublesome and dangerous sins. This is evident from the fact that he issues warnings against them in just about every one of his epistles. One such warning is found in Galatians 5 where we read **“Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.”** (Galatians 5:25–26, NIV84) He also writes in Ephesians 4 **“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”** (Ephesians 4:2–3, NIV84)

God creates that unity. Man can destroy that unity.

So, whether lack of harmony was a specific problem in the Philippian congregation or not, the Philippian believers certainly needed the Christ-centered encouragements of our text. And so do we.

Believers who are “like-minded” judge all things by the word of God. They recognize that there will be differences of opinion in matters where the Word of God does not speak. But they love one another with the unselfish kind of love that gives without expecting anything in return and finds its motive and example in the love

of Christ. And like-minded Christians agree on the great common goal of promoting Jesus' kingdom in the world. Believers think alike spiritually. And they ought to be working and praying continually for a greater unity.

***“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.”*** Be clothed with humility, in lowliness of mind, which is a distinctively Christian virtue.

Christ is the head of his body, the Church, which he calls to be of one mind and to think the same things. Scripture reveals Christ's mind to us. The Spirit gives us a renewed mind. God's love wants to extend the kingdom of God's grace to everyone. Eternal life is the most important goal of the Christian, for himself and for others. This is the single-mindedness of Jesus, of Paul, and of God's Church.

***“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.”*** Consider others more important than yourself. Then the Philippians would show genuine fellowship of the spirit, sympathy and mercies, tenderness and compassion. The Spirit of God works real, lasting fellowship among Christians. Every believer then feels the bonds of this communion. And the work of the Spirit yields compassion and mercies, tender love among the Christians, every one taking a merciful, sympathetic interest in the welfare of the others.

Their harmony should be so complete that they even think the same things, their thoughts following the same trend, running in the same channel. This unity finds its expression in various ways. They have the same love, every one loving the other just as he desires to be loved. They are of one mind or soul, they feel and think as though they had a single soul, deferring to others. They think the same kinds of things, having their minds directed toward that one needful fact that should always be a Christian's chief consideration, the glory of Christ and the building of His kingdom, assisted by the faithful love of every believer.

To this the apostle adds: do nothing through selfishness or vain conceit, in humility regarding one another better than yourselves, not everyone looking to his own interests, but every one also to those of others. Selfish ambition, which seeks only its own interests and ends, and tries to exalt itself at the expense of others, has no right to exist in the midst of the Christian congregation. The situation must rather be at all times that Christians in and by humility regard one another as more important than themselves. By the power of this humble-mindedness, which is the chief characteristic of Christians, each one should think little of himself, but much of his fellow-Christian. Each one should see in himself mainly his faults and weaknesses, in the other, however, excellencies of every description. Of every single member of the Church it should finally be true that he have no selfish notion of furthering only his own interests, his own welfare, but always that which is good and beneficial to his brother. That is the way in which true Christian harmony may be upheld and increased.

We can only have this mind “in” and through Christ Jesus. Scripture goes on to give the perfect example. This example is Christ: his self-humiliation followed by his exaltation. ***“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!”*** (Philippians 2:5–8, NIV84)

As we look at the perfect example of Christ's perfect obedience, may we find a renewed spirit within each of us to be ***“like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.”*** May we ***“do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than [ourselves].*** Lord, lead us to these kinds of lives, every day! Amen.