

## **Navigating Transitions Philippians 2.1-4 (TM)**

Do any of you recognize this character? (I'll give you a hint – think insurance). I usually mute commercials but these Allstate mayhem commercials caught my attention, so I started listening. In this one, Mayhem is playing that part of a GPS unit that goes crazy...recalibrating...turn now. I thought this one was hysterical! until I got my iphone and found myself arguing with Safari...

Contrary to what some of us seem to think, following directions can be a good thing. This is particularly true of the directions God gives us in His living word the Bible. Among the people God inspired to write is Paul, who is the author of many of the books of the New Testament including Philippians. In his letter to the Philippians Paul gives a series of specific directions to the church, some of which are recorded in chapter 2, verses 1-4 where it says (The Message):

“If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care— then do me a favor:

Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.”

The book of Philippians is a letter the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in the city of Philippi which was the first church he established in Europe. Paul's primary purpose in writing was to thank the Philippians for the gift they sent him while he was being detained in Rome. Paul being Paul though couldn't resist taking the opportunity to let the folks know how he was doing, and give them words of encouragement and teaching.

In today's verses Paul begins a teaching about being

like Christ in which he makes a series of “if” statements that can be confusing until you understand that in the Greek language the word translated “if” in English implies an affirmative statement rather than a question. For example, when the Philippians heard the first statement - If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ – they would have also have heard “and you have” even though it wasn't spoken.

Okay, now that I have made that about as clear as mud let's try it this way...in the first verse let's substitute the word “since” for the word “if” and read it again:

“**Since** you've gotten so much out of following Christ, **since** his love has made a difference in your life, **since** being in the community of the Spirit has made a difference to you, **since** you care and have a heart – then do me a favor...”

So here's the deal...Paul is telling the people that they can stay together because of what they have experienced as believers in Christ. He is reminding them (and us) that we are united in Christ and are able to share in Christ's mind and strength. The Philippian church had and FCBC has the power to stay together during this new transition because of what you have received from Christ as individuals and as a community of believers. Through Christ you will be able to “live in a manner worthy of the Gospel” and stay together.

In the next two verses Paul spells out which characteristics can help us stay together and which ones do not. The characteristics that **do not** help us stay together are:

1. Pushing your way to the front or sweet-talking your way to the top – aka a “me first” attitude.
2. Being obsessed with getting your own advantage – aka “having my own agenda.”
3. Expecting uniformity.

The first two characteristics are perfectly demonstrated in Mark 10 where it is recorded that two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, asked Jesus to make them his #1 and #2 guys for all eternity...talk about a classic “me first” attitude! These two guys were so caught up in their

desire to be first and best that they didn't even hear Jesus when he told them he was going to die!

James' and John's inability to hear what Jesus was saying demonstrates the second characteristic that DOES NOT help us stay together...being obsessed with our own agenda. When we are obsessed with our own agenda we become deaf not only to the people around us but to the voice of God.

The third characteristic that DOES NOT help us stay together is to have the expectation that unity means uniformity. Unity is not uniformity! We don't have to look the same, act the same or feel the same things to be united as followers of Christ. The Twelve who followed Jesus are a perfect example of this concept.

There were fishermen, a tax collector, a doctor and a zealot. They had different levels of education, different jobs and different ways of expressing themselves, but they were united in their desire to follow Jesus. Unity **does not** require uniformity.

Our friend, Paul, provides another example of this concept in 1 Cor. 12 where he talks about the variety of spiritual gifts people have. He says "there are different kinds of gifts, but the same spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all people."

Paul goes on to compare the church, the family of God, to the human body saying that one part of the body cannot get along without the other parts and that none is exactly like the other. Unity does not require uniformity! When, in all our diversity we work together for the common good we experience real unity.

One of the things I love about Paul is that he never leaves us with just a list of what not to do but always provides a list of what TO do. In these verses the characteristics that DO help us stay together are:

1. Putting others first.
2. Setting aside our own agendas, and,
3. Listening well to each other and to God.

You don't need me to tell you that putting others first

is difficult and yet in these verses Paul makes it sound simple – forget yourself long enough to lend a helping hand...that helping hand may look like taking time out of your day to help someone move or baking or cooking for a special event.

It may be coming along side someone to encourage and support them when life throws them a curve ball or mentoring someone who is new in their faith or who is struggling with their faith. Jesus put it this way, “love your neighbor as yourself.” Being willing to help each other (that is loving each other) is one of the best ways to ensure that we stay together.

The second characteristic of staying together is the setting aside of our own agendas. This idea is eloquently summarized in Eph. 5.21 where Paul encourages believers to submit or be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

I believe submitting or being subject to one another comes down to giving up my right to be right. One of my professors at Seminary maintained that as soon as a person accepts the possibility that they may be wrong about a given subject or issue that person is on the way to understanding submission.

It seems to me that this takes us right back to Paul's opening words, “if Christ's love has made any difference in your life, if you have a heart, if you care” then you will be able to let go of your right to be right.

The last and arguably the most important characteristic that will help us stay together is to practice good listening skills. Practicing good listening skills will help us hear each other well and help us hear God. Listening to one another requires concentrating on the other person's words and not on our response. It requires repeating back what you have heard and asking if you heard correctly. It requires patience and kindness, or what the Bible calls “being deep-spirited friends.”

When we practice being a good listener we not only communicate better, we show the other person that we respect their ideas and are willing to engage in a dialogue

rather than a debate (aka – argument).

Listening to God may seem like even more of a challenge than listening to each other but I sometimes think we make it more complicated than it needs to be. It has been my experience that God speaks to us in a number of different ways; one of which is through Scripture. Reading, studying, meditating and praying the Scriptures is absolutely necessary if we want to hear from God. Other practices that can help us listen to God are:

- Engaging in regular times of prayer. This includes both talking to God and sitting quietly with God so that we can hear what God has to say. If we are constantly talking and asking for things we will not be able to hear God when He speaks to us.
- Paying attention to what is going on around us and noticing where God seems to be the most active in our lives. We can often gain insights into what God is wanting to say to us if we just pay attention.
- Seeking out people who are mature in their faith such as a spiritual director, a mentor, or a Christian friend and asking them for their insights.
- Listening to the people God puts in our path. They may have just the word we need to hear at just the right time. The better we get at listening to God the better we will be at staying united.

Staying together means being a group of individuals who, despite their differences are willing to show love for one another by putting the well-being of others first. This will mean speaking the truth in love and acting on the truth in love. It will also mean being humble enough to admit that we might be wrong and in being willing to change our ways when necessary.

Sisters and brothers, in these days of transition it is vital to remember that our hope is in the Lord, that this world is not our home and that someday we will be gathered together with all believers of all generations worshipping at the throne of our God.

In the meantime, we can be a positive witness to God's glory and can help expand God's kingdom as we put

others first, listen well and follow God's agenda for our lives and the life of this congregation.

During the next week I encourage you to take a look at the characteristics that can help you all stay and work together during this transition time and beyond. Perhaps you will find you have a characteristic that needs a little work. If so, ask God to help you in that area and begin finding ways improve. And may God bless you all in this endeavor.

Lord's Supper

Blessed be the Tie