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Philippians 2:1-13

## THE SAME MIND

No doubt you know personally how hard it is for a group of people to agree on anything. Whether it is two people trying to decide where to eat dinner or a community of people trying to figure out significant challenges like public education, health care, or immigration, people often do not have the same opinions. We do not see life the same way, we do not approach problems the same way, we do not have the same likes and dislikes. So when the Apostle Paul tells us repeatedly in this letter to the Philippians to "be of the same mind" and "to be of one mind" we are left scratching our heads wondering what planet he lives on. Such calls for unity surely *sound* good and nice and noble, but seem to lack a real-world understanding of the realities of the human situation-- and remind us of such statements as "Why can't we all just get along?" Yeah, wouldn't that be great! Wouldn't it be great if we all could just get along, if we all were of one mind? But have you looked at the world around us?

An appeal for us to be of one mind rings especially hollow given our current times where divisions among people within our country are so deep. Divisions are pronounced in almost every sphere of our life together: politically, racially, economically, ideologically. The recent controversy over free speech and the national anthem is but the latest manifestation of the divide among Americans. Some of these divisions have always been there--festered just below the surface--although we have pretended not to notice them. And some of these divisions have been churned up, particularly by the rhetoric of our President. And the divisive rhetoric is not only stirring up anger and discord here within our country but is now threatening to escalate into a global crisis between the U.S. and North Korea.

So many of us are distressed by what we see and hear. We are distressed by the ugliness, by the hatred, by the injustice and by the intolerance. We are fearful and concerned where all this divisiveness both within our nation and beyond our nation may be heading. And we wonder what is needed to restore civility, respect, and decency.

These past two weeks, I have been able to catch some of the TV documentary on the Vietnam War by the acclaimed film maker Ken Burns. In one of the episodes, a U.S. army commander reflected on the effect the war had on the young men sent there to fight. The commander stated that the veneer of civilization is very thin on everybody, on all of us. A young American soldier would arrive in Vietnam to fight. Back home in Huron, South Dakota, he helped old ladies across the street and went to church on Sundays. But, the commander observed, there in the war zone of Vietnam, in the chaos, and fear, and stress of the war, it didn't take long for the veneer of civilization to erode, turning that young man into someone capable of doing things that were inhumane.

But isn't that the essence of any war? All wars are by definition the whole scale erosion of civilized behavior--where the codes of decent conduct fall away, permitting people to kill and bomb and destroy. That veneer of civilization is thin on all of us. We walk around life, attempting to be good and decent people. But all the while, there is but a very thin layer of civilization attempting to hold in check more darker, dangerous, ugly impulses and thoughts. And sometimes that layer of civilization gets ripped and torn and gives way.

During the period of time between 1880 and 1940, some 5,000 African American men, women, and children were lynched in this country. A great many of these murders were pre-meditated, calculated, planned events, that were tolerated and even sanctioned by local and state authorities. Some prominent newspapers would even publicize the date, time, and place of

expected lynchings. Sometimes as many as ten to twenty thousand spectators, including children, would show up to watch the event. Postcards made of the photographs of the victim with white onlookers striking a pose for the camera were sold and sent to relatives and friends. All this took place quite openly in a democratic country--a country grounded in laws, governed by a Constitution, guided by so-called "Christian" values. The veneer of civilization is very thin on all of us. We cannot count on our civilized society, our form of government, our civic organizations to save us from the divisive and dangerous impulses that can, have, and will emerge from even the best of us.

So how then, how then can we be united, find harmony, manage the hazards of human nature that would harm ourselves and others? How can we hope to be united?

When the Apostle Paul calls us to be of one mind, he was not speaking from a naive understanding of unity and harmony. Paul was very acquainted with the divisions that existed between and among people. He was very acquainted with human brokenness. In fact, when Paul wrote this letter the church in Philippi, he was himself sitting in prison. We are talking about a first century prison: dark, damp, rat-infested. He was well acquainted with the hostility humans can show one another, with the sufferings humans can impose on one another, with the intolerance humans can have for one another. And he wrote to the church in Philippi that was itself experiencing some kind of external opposition themselves, possibly persecution, as well as some kind of internal discord among themselves. Paul understood that they were suffering real human problems. We have this writing from Paul, from his imprisonment, to this first century church and to us by extension, to us who are imprisoned by our own divisions, imprisoned by our human brokenness.

In this letter, Paul calls us to unity, to be of one mind, to have the same mind. Here is what he *doesn't* mean: he doesn't mean we all should agree on everything. Paul clarifies what he means by having the same mind. He says, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. Having the same mind is not about agreeing with one another, but is rather about having a common orientation, a common attitude. That common orientation is centered on Christ. He calls us to have a Christ-like mindset, to adopt the same mindset that guided Jesus. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

Paul goes on to explain what that common orientation looks like. He talks about Jesus' unusual approach to power and status--how rather than using his power and status as God's son to exalt himself, how he humbled himself and became obedient to the way of God, the way of love, compassion, mercy, and justice. Paul lifts up the mindset of Christ as the path toward unity among us. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, says Paul.

Today on World Communion Sunday we will gather around this Table in symbolic unity with Christians all over the globe. This Table stands as a symbol of the way of Christ, and it is laid and set before us in a very broken, divided, suffering world, and before us and our very broken, divided, and difficult lives. It was at that table with his disciples that Christ offered love, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, humble sacrifice. It was here that he offered reconciliation--the gift of uniting those who have been divided internally and externally. And so, when we come to this Table, we are orienting ourselves around the mindset of Christ. The hope is that we will leave this Table to then carry that same mindset out into the rest of our lives, orienting each and every day around the gifts we receive here, carrying with us the mindset of Christ in all our human interactions.

What we receive at this Table and what we carry with us from this Table are the only way we will find unity and healing for what divides us. The gifts we receive at this Table are our true hope for reconciling divided peoples. Of course, we should indeed work to have just and fair governments. We should vote, march, write letters, volunteer in community efforts to improve our society. But we are mistaken if we think that lasting unity or peace will come about from our human structures. No form of government, no civic organization, no laws or policies, no religious organization even can save us from ourselves. The healing we long for from all these painful divisions can only be found in orienting our lives around what we are offered here: here at the Table of love.