

THE ONE THING
FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC
19 FEBRUARY 2023
PHILIPPIANS 1:27-2:8

Our text this morning comes from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, written while he was imprisoned — chapter one, verse 27 through chapter two, verses 1-8. Listen for the word of God.

27 Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. ²⁹For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— ³⁰since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Mind one thing, that's how Karl Barth, the great Swiss theologian of the 20th century, translates verse two. *Complete my joy by minding one thing*. The NRSV, which we read today, prefers a passive translation — *be of one mind*. The King James Version does something similar, suggesting that we can fulfill Paul's joy by being "likeminded," while the CEV prefers living "in harmony." Eugene Peterson, when he translated *The Message*, chose "Agree with each other."

What would y'all do this morning if I told you the key to Christian living, the secret ingredient that makes it all work, is as simple as finding agreement? Do y'all think we could do that? We can all agree it's 2023 and our church stands on Augusta Rd., but I imagine the consensus would start to break down shortly after those affirmations. Beamer Ball or Clemson Grit? A strong central bureaucracy or laissez-faire economics? Opening our borders or enforcing strong national delineations? What do you say — can we "be of one mind?"

Something in me bristles at the translations of today's text that rally around "likemindedness," as if Christianity is a practice of simply agreeing to get along. Life is more complicated than that and there are real issues that divide faithful folk.

To borrow a phrase from the Rabbis, where two Presbyterians are gathered there are at least three opinions — and God help you if I'm in the room, you'll have to add at five more to the count!

Single-mindedness, it seems, is a naive goal, impossible on this side of the Kingdom.

Unless you're in Philly. I read the Philadelphia news each morning. My in-laws live nearby and it's a city dear to my heart. Last week I read an article about a group of Philadelphians gathered for jury duty. During roll call they were given three options to mark themselves available for service. When their name was called they could respond with "here," "present," or "Go Birds."

Which one do you think they chose? As momentum built for Super Bowl 57, how did the jurors respond when their names were called? "Go Birds."

After all, in Philadelphia "Go Birds," a reference to the beloved professional football team, serves a number of linguistic purposes. It is a greeting, a way to express gratitude, a term of endearment, and a rallying call. If you are leaving a Philadelphia WaWa with a hoagie and someone holds the door open for you, it is your ethical responsibility to express your gratitude thusly: "Go Birds!"

Perhaps Philadelphia — the city of Brotherly Love — can be our template for life unified in the Spirit, a place where everything is Hallelujah and Go Birds.

When it comes to sports it seems like we can find harmony (at least if we're rooting for the same team). We can flatten our differences — who we voted for, what values we hold, how

we believe our lives should be organized — and agree to agree. Is Christian living as simple as that? Wear the right colors, know the right cheers, identify the right enemies?

There is a reflexive edge in fandom. You find the people who wear your colors and glom on to them despite all your differences. You focus on the thing that unifies you and forget the rest. But it's not only fandom that compels mindless sameness, at least when we get down to it. It's our political and social lives too.

I hear it all the time. We complain that modern life is too complex for unity; we lament our irreconcilable differences, but it seems to me that when we take a hard look at our own ideologies, we'll find an uncritical, reflexive edge there too, a sort of group-think that reduces people to an "us" and a "them," and prioritizes the good of "us" against the foolishness, laziness, absurdity of "them."

We play at our lives like it's Saturday Down South. Pick your team. How else can we explain the ways our nation has become so siloed, so cut off from one another? We find our likemindedness in mindless zero-sum narratives. We contort our faith to match the message of advertisers and networks. We parrot the language of Christianity while we serve our own ends.

We sit at the feet of Fox News and drink in its "truth." Or we are singularly devoted to the good news of MSNBC, and open our minds to its word only. Each morning we take as given the operating narratives of *The Times* or *The Journal*. On Twitter we follow those with whom we agree. On Facebook we build our outrage and hurl it against those whose beliefs counter our own.

From our earliest days we consume ideology — both implied and explicit — that shape our understanding of who's in and who's out, whose bodies are to be protected and whose can be discarded, who is worthy, who is pure, the behaviors and family structures are standard, and those that are deviant. In seeking like-mindedness we separate ourselves from one another, follow our own desires, our own prejudices, our own ends.

Be of one mind in lived reality is too often reduced to uninspired sameness — selfish ambition, as Paul calls it, and conceit.

Which is why Barth's translation haunts me. *Mind one thing*. Minding one thing is a fundamentally different attitude than simply being like minded. It is not flat unanimity, giving oneself over to a one-sided narratives.

Minding one thing emphasizes Christian "unity" built around constant vigilance (like the way my grandmother used to encourage me to *mind my manners*, or my mother to *mind my business*). Minding one thing is not agreeing to a dogmatic idea or a political ideology. It is a reference point to a reality outside of us — the manners you know, the business you know is not yours.

Minding one thing is a way of being that recognizes that we are not gods; heck, we are not even in charge of our own fate! We are people in community with one another, people who — regardless of identity, of social status, of any one thing — stand under the judgment and grace of the God, and hear the very same pronouncement of forgiveness and love. All of us. Together.

Minding one thing is an action. It's not a reaction, a reflexive (and ultimately empty) response. It's a way of being oriented to our neighbor, a way of working for their good, their interests, and their rights.

The difference between "being like minded" and *minding one thing* is the difference between where we are — siloed in our own political, gendered, and economic realities — and who we were made to be.

The letter we have before us today was written from prison. Paul was in chains, a guest of the Roman empire and he was writing to friends. It is easy 2000 years later to romanticize the recipients of the letter, as if they are monastics running around in their togas thrilled to cast off the polytheism of Rome for a simple message about Jesus, and to assume that their lives were less complicated than our own. But there was no ease in the Philippian congregation.

Even in the young church there was significant national, religious, ethnic, and economic diversity. Slaves gathered to hear the gospel. Freed men and women gathered, some of whom lived in relative luxury and some of whom were as poor as the poorest slave. Despite being a colony of Rome, most of the folks to whom Paul wrote were Greek, which meant that they were not citizens. They were granted neither rights nor protections from the Roman overseers. Then again, some folks in the church were Roman. They were elites, granted not only protections but also titles and social prestige.

Do you think slave and free, Roman and Greek, God-fearers and Bacchanalians, men and women found among them easy agreement about matters of day-to-day life?

Paul knew the constant threat of division in the church, and he knew that division harmed Christian witness. Nevertheless, he worked in the letter to bond the groups to one another. The way he did so marked Christianity as something new in Philippi — a way of being grounded not in one's own status or prestige, but 'in the one thing' — the ethical imperative of the other with whom and before whom we are redeemed by God, and our responsibility to tend to their needs, their rights, their interests.

For Paul, the "one thing" is related inextricably to life together. It is not unity. It is conforming our minds to Christ's and arranging our lives according to the needs of God's people. It's minding the same thing that God minded, it's paying attention to what God pays attention to. It isn't perpetual agreement, it's a shared goal — the interests of the others with whom we strive for the Kingdom.

“³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴... look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

Minding one thing is not rallying around a cause, it is putting aside our own stuff, our rights, our interests, in favor of someone else's. It is being secure enough in being loved, in being accepted, in being found, that we look to the goods of our neighbors over our own (even against our own!). It's looking out for one another — trusting that even as we look out for each other, we are being sought out by those very folks that count us as neighbors.

Minding one another is finding the kingdom and being found in it, even as we await its consummation.

The command is clear. To be in Christ is to mind one thing.

Your neighbor!

Even him,
you know the one,
the one who believes differently,
who doesn't deserve it,
who grates your nerves,
who crashes our singularity,
whose yard looks awful,
who says all the wrong things,
who believes that nonsense and watches that channel,

who simply is, and by being reminds you of the God under whose promise we all stand.
Mind not your own needs but hers, but theirs, but his!

Minding one thing, it turns out, is holding very same mind that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was God did not regard that identity, that power, that prestige as worthy of holding on to, but released it in service of creation. That's the sum of incarnation, the story of Christmas, of Easter, of every ordinary Sunday since — the self-emptying that characterizes who our God is and who we are called to be.

Minding the other fills the gap between where we are in the Empire (selfish, ambitious) and where we're called to be in the Kingdom (selfless, striving together for one another). After all, if God does not hold on to privilege, why should we? If God does not seek self-preservation, why should we? On the contrary, if God is at every turn seeking the good of the other, whether or not they (we!) deserve it, what is stopping us?

What would it mean for us to look to the rights, the interests of others (as verse 3 demands)? What would it mean for Christians to consider not what we think we need but what we *know* others do: the right for schoolchildren and college students to gather free of threats of violence, the right of our Black and brown brothers and sisters live free from intimidation, the rights of poor folks to escape self-consuming cycles of poverty and debt, the right of our gay brothers and sisters to seek full welcome. What does it mean for those

of us who have much *to empty ourselves in pursuit of single-minded devotion to our neighbors and their needs?!*

What if action for the other is our unity, alongside and despite our very real differences. Paul believes that single minded devotion to the neighbor, that constant action is what it means to be a Christ follower, not because we agree about who should be president or whether electric energy will save the world, but because we share a goal: the kingdom of God that welcomes us, that rights us, that transforms us.

And it's not some Pollyanna dream. I've seen it here. I've saw it when this community gathered to mourn the loss of a beloved Carolina student — a young man who they'd raised up in the faith. When families dropped holiday plans to support and grieve together, to offer meals and organize rides, to refuse desperation even in the depths of loss. When Clemson faithful wore Carolina garnet and "Forever to Thee" bands as a sign of support in an impossible time. What is that if not minding one thing — a group of disparate folks dropping everything — including even their closely guarded allegiances — to mind one another.

I saw it in the midst of the pandemic when everyone was expected to close their wallets, but this church came together selflessly (despite very real disagreements about how to and not to gather), to fund a house for formerly incarcerated women, to be a small part in granting them a future even as we risked our own financial growth.

I've seen it in the way this congregation embraces one another — embraces even me and my family — despite very real political differences and finds a way to work with and for the kingdom, with and for one another.

I've seen it.
But like your manners and the Birds,
it always has to be at the front of our minds.

It's always at risk if we are not constantly keeping mind.
What does it mean to be a Christian in 21st Century America?
Mind one thing.
Each other.