

A Letter to the Church in a Divided Time

Philippians 4: 2-9

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³ Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

We have just lived through a historic election. More people exercised their right and responsibility to vote than any other time in our history. The country elected the first woman vice president—the first woman of color—and shattered the glass ceiling. As we watched her addressing the nation, and specifically all the young girls watching the moment, and as I sat next to my daughter who was listening intently, it occurred to me that for the first time in too long, we were watching the speech of a presidential leader as a family. We didn't have to shield our children's ears from the divisive rhetoric we've grown used to. As James Baldwin once said, "Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them."

Then as the camera panned out into the crowd, I saw the beautiful diversity of Muslim women in hijabs, and African American women with fists raised, and rainbow flags waving, and something in my soul felt lighter and revived. Perhaps you felt it too.

While it is important to acknowledge these things, we also remember that half the country is grieving—and some of us remember what that feels like. We still have the very real image of the electoral college map in our minds. Red vs. Blue. Liberal vs. Conservative. Democrat vs. Republican. Urban vs. rural. It seems as if we are inhabiting two different worlds. And the damage of our insular partisan divisions is a deep sadness in me: our leaders are willing to put party above humanity, above morality, above what is true and just and for the common good. While some of us might feel a sense of relief, half of us—including perhaps some of our family and neighbors—feel scared and resentful. We are still left with the lingering sensation that we live as an "us" versus "them" society, and because of it we as a nation have lost.

So perhaps we look back and borrow some wisdom from the early church. Two leaders in the Philippian congregation, Syntyche and Euodia, are in conflict over something which threatens to divide the church. We don't know what it is. But since they are both leaders of the church, it probably has something to do with their vision for the future of their community. It's easy to imagine people casting their votes based on which ideology lines up with their own. Some

belong to team Syntyche, and others belong to team Euodia. We could even imagine that one group sat on one side of the church, while the other sat on the opposite side.

So St. Paul addresses the issue at the end of his letter. And notice he doesn't take a side. Instead, he simply tells them to be of the same mind of the Lord. He reminds them that even though they feel like they belong to two separate teams, really, they belong to the same God. He's attempting to mend the division by pointing beyond their ideologies to a way of life that honors both their differences and their commonalities, both their independence as well as their interdependence. On NPR they interviewed Raphael Warnock, who is now in a runoff for Senator in Georgia. He is also the preacher at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta—where Dr. King famously served. He said some of us wear red jerseys, some of us wear blue jerseys, but at the end of the day we all play for the same team. We know where he got the idea from. The sorrow I have been feeling during this roller coaster week is that we are so polarized that we have forgotten we are on the same human team.

So if our neighbor doesn't have health care it is a "we" issue. If racism and sexism and xenophobia continue to threaten our neighbor, it is a "we" problem. These aren't liberal or conservative issues; these are life issues which are also gospel issues because the gospel is all about our lives. St. Paul tries to get them to see that even though they may have passionate differences, at the end of the day they are still on the same team and belong to the same God. Then here's the kicker: St. Paul does something even more brilliant. He turns around and tells the congregation that it's up to them to help their leaders achieve healing by modeling unity for them. The truth is if our leaders aren't going to work together to find common ground, we are going to have to model what that looks like for them. The healing begins with us.

There is an old guy in the neighborhood who we would see walking around the block with his wife. Recently he has been walking alone. Turns out, his wife has recently died. The only thing some neighbors know about him is that he has a sign in his front yard supporting a presidential candidate. But there is something deeper than our partisan affiliations: our humanity. So the neighbors still bring him soup, still take him out for meal; they still check in on him and take care of him.

We aren't followers of Trump. We aren't followers of Biden. We are followers of Jesus who models what love, peace and justice looks like. Of course, we don't always do it well, but if we aren't willing or able to model what humanizing each other looks like, then who will?

Perhaps it's why Paul ends the letter with a capstone of encouragement:
"Finally, Beloved, keep doing what is true and honorable and just and pure and commendable...and the God of peace will be with you."

Keep doing what you do:

Keep tearing down barriers and knocking down walls.

Keep building longer tables and wider doors.

Keep feeding families at Bolton Pantry and saying, "Black Lives Matter."

Keep loving your neighbor and insisting that we can build a nation where all people flourish.

Keep speaking the truth and asking what is the work that is mine to do?

And then do it again and again and again.

I know we are exhausted. I know for most of us, we have been overwhelmed and just trying to get through each day. And this election has revealed a lot about who we are and how far we still have to go.

But today, whether we are elated or deflated, take a breath.
And then tomorrow and the next day and the day after that, we get back to doing what we do.

Whatever is true.
Whatever is honorable.
Whatever is just and gentle and worthy of the gospel.
Keep on doing these things, beloved,
and I promise, the God of peace will be with you.