**17th Sunday after Pentecost**

**St. James Episcopal Church, Louisa**

**Rev. Dr. Jennifer L. Lazzuri**

**Year A**

**September 27, 2020**

**Philippians 2:1-13**

***Unity. Regardless.***

Being a church leader there is always one training that new pastors never seem to get enough of and that which every company speaks, and that people pay big money to get a consultant to come in to speak about. “Conflict Management”.

Conflict management has become a buzz word in organizations today and everybody seems to want to know how to do it. “Handling conflict” seems to be on the top ten list of skills that people seek when they hire leaders. It is understood/assumed that there will be conflict and how an organization deals with that conflict is make or break it time.

There are many “how to” books on how to handle conflict and how to have those difficult conversations when conflict does occur. We all know the end result when conflict is handled badly, people leave, doors slam, feelings get hurt. In worst case scenarios, families, churches split and become divided.

I have just finished reading a book entitled Uproar: Calm Leadership in Anxious Times by Peter Steinke. Steinke is a student of Bowen Family system theory. The systems perspective is that how a leader handles themselves in an emotional system is more determinate than anything else in terms of outcome when a system is stressed.

Today our Epistle text is from the book of Philippians and as we discussed last week, Paul is writing this letter to the Church at Philippi who are in the midst of suffering and being oppressed by the Roman Empire. He writes this letter as a source of encouragement to them - he writes as their religious leader.

According to Steinke, how Paul positions himself as their leader at this time is important.

Paul begins begins by saying to the Philippians, “…if there is anything that will move you, any incentive in love, any fellowship in the Spirit - I appeal to you, make my joy complete by being of a single mind, one in love, one in heart and one in mind.”

Whatever the problem that was going on in Philippi, Paul’s prayer for them was they would be of one mind. He doesn’t name or tackle the disagreements directly. He doesn't try to position himself on one side or the other, mounting arguments for and arguments against. Paul doesn't even attempt to find some elusive middle-ground or moderating position.

In systems talk, Paul handled himself by defining himself, by stating what his expectations are for the church at Philippi - he quotes from what we believe to be a popular early Christian hymn.

He begins, vs. 5, “Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.

But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave...he humbled himself even to the point of death on a cross.”

Paul doesn't talk directly about the divisions; rather, he sings about the glory of Jesus Christ. He doesn't focus on our differences, he focuses upon what we have most in common - God for us, all of us, loved, saved together, in Jesus Christ.

Paul is bold to tell this divided congregation, "Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus." Paul tells them that he wants them to inculcate the spirit of Christ, to think like Christ thinks, to do what Christ did and what Christ does.3

It's a claim of the Christian faith that Jesus Christ makes possible that which the world considers impossible. Christ has called us not only to believe in him but also to follow him, even more, to emulate him, to engage in the same moves in our lives that characterized his. It is a claim of our faith that Christ not only commands us to live together, minister together as one, but also enables us to do what he commands.

His Holy Spirit heals our wounds, bridges our boundaries, and closes our gaps. The Church - and our beloved St. James - is called to be a showcase for what God can do.

The pagan world looked at the early church and marveled that here was a group of people that was not organized as the world organized itself - on the basis of family or gender, class and money. The surrounding Roman culture said, "Look how they love one another!"

During this time in our nation, it would be wonderful if those around us could look at the Church and look at St. James, and say, “look how they love one another!”

Jesus Christ is, as Paul says, the true "form of God." We look at Jesus and we see God's true nature - that is to bring people together in his name. And we also see our assignment - to bring people together, divided by so many different political, and social, and gender points of view to do something different, congregating by something more significant than our sameness.

Paul encourages the church to focus upon our originating cause, our great mission - to allow Jesus Christ to gather us, to overcome our boundaries and divisions and to be one in Jesus Christ. In other words, to show the world what Jesus can do.

“Complete my joy by thinking the same way and having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other. Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves.” v. 2-3.

Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. Adopt the attitude that was in Jesus Christ.

Just before his crucifixion, Jesus prays not that the church would be effective or powerful, and successful, but rather "that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." John 17:21

Amen.