

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
September 25, 2011
~ Bring a Friend to Church Sunday ~
Philippians 2:1-13

“Well yes!...and maybe no”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

This past Tuesday, I had the wonderful privilege of performing a wedding for two beautiful women, with their infant daughter present and coo-ing. Tara and Meg were married in Look Park with a really handsome man as their maid of honor. They chose to be formally and legally married on the day “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” was lifted in the military. Their wedding was a celebration on many levels.

Beautiful things were said during the ceremony...they wrote their own vows, we blessed their wedding rings, we prayed for this wonderful family and their union of love. It was a lovely service, filled with joy. I was quietly and secretly glad that Meg and Tara did not choose to have 1 Corinthians 13 read during their ceremony. 1 Corinthians 13 is a lovely passage, inspiring and moving and it is often read at weddings, but it was not read when Meg and Tara were married on Tuesday.

Let me remind you of those words in 1 Corinthians:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,^{} but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

This is a wonderful passage and should be read at weddings, but it is not the whole story. It is the ideal, it is what we aim to achieve, it describes our love for our partners at our best moments. And we hope there are many of those best moments

in our married lives. But having lived almost 60 years and having been partnered for more than half of those years, I can say with some authority, love is not always patient and kind, sometimes love is envious and boastful, arrogant and rude. Sometimes we do insist on our own way and sometimes we're irritable. We want our love to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things and endure all things but sometimes your partner forgetting to stop and buy milk on the way home from work is just unbearable.

Paul's description in 1 Corinthians makes me want to say YES YES but maybe no. We aim, we strive, we hope to live that vision...but we often miss the mark. But we aim and we try and often the conscious striving is good enough.

When couples want to add 1 Corinthians 13 to their wedding ceremonies I always agree, but I encourage them to pair that reading with Colossians 3:13...listen...

Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

I tell all couples in pre-marital counseling: love deeply, fiercely and faithfully; practice forgiveness; and learn to fight well.

Just as 1 Corinthians 13 is the ideal about love and, in my mind, needs to be paired with the Colossians passage about forgiveness, so too does our reading for today from Philippians need to be paired with a dose of reality.

Paul is writing to his beloved church in Philippi and he is exhorting them to be their best and strongest selves. Now remember Paul is writing from prison and he is facing execution, so when he writes this letter it is not mellow or nuanced. Paul is out there, with powerful images and strong language. What he writes is beautiful, inspiring and intimidating.

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

Whoa. Tall order.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit... in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

Maybe for forty seconds on the third Tuesday of the month sometime last year I had the same mind in me that was in Christ Jesus, and I am sure it was a wonderful but fleeting moment.

And so why does Paul set such a high standard? How can we achieve what he is telling us to do? Does he believe that we can actually do that...do NOTHING from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than ourselves each and every hour? Not look to our own interests but always to the interests of others? Have the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus? Why set the bar so high?

I think the answer is twofold...

First I think Paul tips his hand at the very end of this passage...

Listen to the last line...

*Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, **work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you...***

I hear Paul saying two contradictory things, but I think both are true. Paul is saying okay this IS a tall order and work it out on your own with fear and trembling...JUST DO IT (as the Nike ad says)...YOU...out there....Just do it. AND yet, he is also saying...God is working within you, you are not doing this alone.....*for it is God who is at work in you...*

Paul is telling us to reach and aim high and work on our stuff with fear and trembling, and also to rest in the sure knowledge that God is already at work within us and so we have a chance at having the same mind as Jesus.

For me, Paul's exhortation in his letter to the early Church in Corinth is asking us to be like Christ, not to be Christ. As Christians, we are meant to be **Christ-like**. We are called to model ourselves after Christ AND at the same time accept that we are walking- talking works in progress.

Consider the difference between imitating and impersonating.

Paul is calling us to be imitators of Christ, to live in a way that allows other people to see Christ in us. What is an imitator?

There is a great difference between an impersonator and an imitator.

Impersonators take great pains to make people believe they are who they are not.

On the other hand, imitators are clearly aware that they strive to live up to the challenge of being a **reflection** of the person they look up to.

We all know that we will fall short of a perfect imitation of Christ. And that is all right because ultimately Paul's admonition is not about impersonating Christ, but about adopting Christlike attitudes in all aspects of our lives. When we try to live up to God's standards on our own, we become impersonators. That is too hard and an unrealistic expectation on our part, and it is not what God expects of us.

So what does it mean to be called a **reflection** of Christ? It is not a call to perfection but an invitation to journey with God and imitate Jesus. We are not called to arrive at the destination of perfection, we are called to commit to the journey. We are called to imitate Jesus and so that over time as we imitate Jesus and imitate Jesus and imitate Jesus, we quietly grow more and more like Jesus.

I worry that too often there is a big gap between how Christians behave and the how the life of the man we profess to follow actually behaved.

Mohandas Gandhi once said, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

I want this Church community to close that gap between us as Christians and our Christ. So that today, if Gandhi were alive and were to come to Haydenville, Massachusetts, he would meet us and say, "I like your Christ, and I like you Christians. You Christians are so much like your Christ."

But beware.

You should be skeptical of my words and fearful about this message.

Being Christians who are so much like our Christ is a dangerous proposition.

Actually following Jesus is not a walk in the park. This journey is hard.

Keep in mind who we are imitating.

The Jesus I want you to imitate is not the passive, domesticated, nice fellow with watery eyes in the Sunday School portraits of your childhood. Asking you to imitate Jesus is asking you to be **counter-cultural** and that is a tall order.

Imitating Jesus means embracing justice and going to bat for justice and speaking out for justice and being disliked and marginalized because of your commitment to justice. It means being unbearably generous and impossibly giving. It means showing courage in the face of fear and harassment. It means choosing the lonely road if it is the right road. It means living a life committed to radical inclusion and a love for peace. Imitating Jesus means befriending those on the edges of acceptable society. That is what our Jesus did—for him those folks were tax collectors (they colluded with the Roman Empire), poor people (they were exploited by the Roman Empire), prostitutes (they serviced the armies of the Roman Empire), woman (they were considered the property of their husbands and sons), children (they were totally invisible), and sick people (they were unclean and could not be touched).

Today Jesus' people are gay men, lesbians and the transgendered community, poor people, people with AIDS, homeless people, undocumented refugees, sick people, street people, prostitutes, people of Arab descent, people with mental illness and people with disabilities. Those are the folks who are marginalized, who live in fear of not be chosen, of being isolated, beaten, left out or ignored. Those are Jesus' people. Asking you to imitate Jesus is a dangerous request.

And so when we think about living up to Paul's words in his letter to the Philippians, when I ask you to imitate Jesus, you will probably say YES YES and maybe no.

I want to follow Jesus, I want to be Christ-like... I want to do what is right and good, I want to do what must be done and I'm too afraid, I'm too inadequate, and I will fall short. Well all that is true.

You want to be Christ-like, and you will try and you will fail. Both are true and that's okay because Paul's got it right...

...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;

for it is God who is at work in you.

Work it out, do your best, aim high, work out your stuff with fear and trembling, do your very best...and also take heart, for God is at work in you. God is present, God will guide, and God will help.

We aim high, we are inspired to be Christ-like, we read 1 Corinthians about love and Philippians 2 about having the same mind as Christ and we say YES YES and maybe no. But if we remember to imitate, not impersonate, we are on the journey. If we remember that that paradoxically it is totally up to us, but God is also at work in us, we are on the journey.

Arriving at the destination of perfection is not realistic, it is not even the goal. We are mortals, we are not Christ.

But trying each day to imitate Christ and be just one ounce more perfect with each passing day IS totally within our reach, and that is being Christ-like.

And so on one of our very best days, someone might visit our church—like maybe a friend of a parishioner—and the friend might be new to Christianity and the friend might worship with us and pray and sing with us and the friend might go to Coffee Hour and the friend might say to the person who brought them to church, “I like your Christ, and I like you Christians. You Christians are so much like your Christ.”

Amen.

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