

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
October 9, 2011
Philippians 4:1-9

“Let your gentleness be known?”

*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 February we did what we do every February, we held our Church’s Annual Meeting. The meeting went well in many ways, but it did not go so well in other ways and it generated feelings of frustration and alienation among some members of our Church Family. Although the Deacons, Trustees and I thought we were ready for the Annual Meeting and we had, as the saying goes, “our ducks in a row,” we did not anticipate the questions, feelings and issues that arose during the discussion of the Church budget, the By-laws and Constitution, and the process we use for nominating people for committees and boards.

Every single person responsible for leading the Annual Meeting took his/her task seriously and prepared with diligence and care, and yet we did not expect the questions that emerged during the meeting and our answers, including and maybe particularly my answers, left some beloved Church members feeling confused and distressed.

After the Annual Meeting, our dear brother Wyatt was upset and disillusioned—he felt we were not at our best during the meeting. He was troubled—he went home quite churned up. I was somewhat oblivious to Wyatt’s distress but several Church members were not and they called me and said, “Pastor, Wyatt is really distressed. The Annual Meeting upset him. You need to talk to him.”

Wyatt and I live fairly near one another in Northampton so I called him and asked if he would meet me downtown for a cup of coffee. He said fine. We met in a coffee shop, held our mugs of hot coffee, and looked at each other across the table. “The Annual Meeting did not go well, Pastor,” Wyatt said in his low, resonant voice.

“No it didn’t,” I said.

“It has me quite troubled,” Wyatt said staring me in the eye.

“I know. You are very upset. Upset enough to consider leaving the church.”

“It’s true,” Wyatt said. “Upset enough to consider leaving the Church.”

I paused. I nodded. I looked at Wyatt. I love Wyatt.

I had been a big part of the problem at the Annual Meeting. I knew that. He knew that. I did not want Wyatt to leave the Church. I knew that. He knew that.

“Wyatt,” I said after some consideration, “you can leave our Church and find another Church—First Churches is wonderful, Edwards is a vital Church. You can go to another Church. And you might find that you like their problems more than our problems. You can worship elsewhere...just be aware that you will be trading OUR problems for THEIR problems because you will never find a Church with NO problems.”

Wyatt smiled his warm and mischievous smile.

“Uh, huh,” he said.

“It’s true,” I said. “You might like THEIR problems more. You know our church’s problems, you could list them all, and you might like another Church’s problems more.”

Wyatt knew what I was saying was true. He and I had talked theology and Church politics in the past. Wyatt is a smart and savvy guy. He sipped his coffee.

We talked some more and then after a while Wyatt said, “I think I’ll stay with our problems.” “Good,” I said. “Stay with our problems Wyatt and help me fix them.”

“You’ve got a deal,” Wyatt said.

I remember that coffee date with great fondness because Wyatt and I were so real with one another. I appreciate Wyatt’s love for the Church. And his willingness to stay put and help the Church change and strengthen was evident to me and it touched me.

I thought about that exchange with my beloved Wyatt when I read the Philippians passage, our Scripture reading for today. The apostle Paul is in prison and he is writing to his favorite Church, the one he established in Philippi. Paul does not know if he will be executed in prison, he does not know if this is the last letter he will ever write. What he does know is that there is conflict in his favorite Church among his favorite people. Paul knows he is writing to a sadly divided and contentious congregation and he is appealing for Christian unity among the people at Philippi.

The conflict seems to be centered around two women, Euodia and Syntyche, who are fighting. Paul is urging them to reconcile and not to divide the congregation.

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companions, 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.

Paul is in prison, writing a letter to an early Christian Church, asking them to make up, to forgive, to reconcile, to look past their differences, their conflict and their upset and work towards strengthening the Church as a whole.

Paul is desperate to help them see that their differences are minor compared to the joy they have experienced and will again experience as a community of faith, deeply connected to one another and to God through love.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known... Paul writes.

Paul does not just want them to reconcile, he wants them to rejoice...to look past their arguments and frustrations and rejoice in the Lord and in one another. It is an unaffected, child-like wish: that his people at Philippi will rejoice in the Lord. Paul believes THIS is the hallmark of the Christian life.

Soaring over everything else that fill Church calendars, soaring over all the internal problems, fights, questions, and minor disputes, soaring over all the things that divide communities of faith, JOY (Paul would say) is **the** characteristic that defines Christians.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known...

Rise above the squabbles Paul is saying, and rejoice in the Lord.

And he goes further...don't just rejoice, but *Let your gentleness be known...* This is a tender plea. Let your gentleness be known...let your sweetness, your kind, forgiving side and tender heart come forward. It is a lovely image and good advice.

But *Let your gentleness be known...* may not be precisely what Paul actually said. That same sentence has also been translated from the original Greek in this way: *Let all men know your forbearance...*

THAT is how you will find Paul's advice in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Paula read for us from the NEW Revised Standard Version of the Bible—which says “Let your gentleness be known...”

But the RSV says something different and I think the difference is important... “Let all men know your **forbearance**...”

Gentleness is one thing...sweet, caring, soft.

Forbearance is something else. And I think Paul probably said “forbearance.”

In communities of faith, we sometimes just forbear...we buck up, we endure, we show patience, we demonstrate self-control.

That was the case with our ancient brothers and sisters, and that is the case today.

MOST days we love, honor and delight in each other.

But some days we just tolerate each other. That's forbearance.

And I think Paul was right...I think he used THAT word, and I think he meant it.

Euodia and Syntyche, Paul is saying, just buck up. Deal with your differences, show patience, mercy and forgiveness. Talk this through and let this go.

Your conflict is threatening your community.

Make your love of God bigger than your fight with each other...that's what Paul is saying.

I find it enormously comforting that poor old Paul, locked up in prison, got word that things were so bad in Philippi and Euodia and Syntyche were fighting so terribly that he had to write to them and intervene. I actually think it's wonderful...because it makes me feel so normal and like our Church is so ordinary, and our problems are so small, and our conflicts are so minor. Phew. We're just like our ancient brothers and sisters. Hooray for normal human behavior. Hooray for forgiveness and taking the long view. And hooray for commitment, endurance, and forbearance.

Working and worshiping together in community IS NOT EASY. I say this all the time, I know I am a broken record. Our lives as Christians would be totally different if Jesus had declared his ministry and gone and sat in some cave or on some mountaintop and people came one-by-one, independently to sit at his feet and receive his wisdom. But he didn't. Jesus' entire ministry was done in community. He recruited followers, he wandered the hillsides, he preached in villages, he stayed in strangers' homes, he gathered crowds, he touched sick people, he walked, healed and taught with crowds around him....

Jesus was with people nearly all the time; he was a community organizer.

He did his work in, with, around, and among people. And so we, as his beloved followers, do as well. And community is hard. We disagree, we fight, we withdraw, we get mad. And Thank you God: we also forgive, we also make up, we also reconcile, we also move on. Together.

I have recently heard an expression that I love:

“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”

I don't just want to speed up my life, I want to deepen my life.

I want to travel an ever-deepening spiritual journey as I grow and age and live this life of mine. And I want to journey in community. More specifically, I want to journey with you. You teach me things, you make me stretch, you make me laugh, you take care of me when I am sick, you lend me your strength when I am depleted, you are smart, savvy and you inspire me.

I choose community. It's harder than going it alone, it is more time consuming than going it alone, it is **MUCH MORE WORK** than going it alone. And it is what I crave and what I need and what I love.

Paul tells us in this letter to his brothers and sisters in Philippi that JOY is there beneath the conflict, ready for us to grab and lift and feel. Joy and rejoicing weave a colorful thread throughout many of the verses in the Book of Philippians. Words for “joy” and “rejoicing” appear more than a dozen times in this brief book in the Bible—Philippians only has four chapters total—and JOY is a theme throughout. For Paul, Christian joy is subversive—it overturns threatening situations and frustrates those with selfish plans. Tyrants fear it, Paul believes, because they do not understand its origin. For Paul, joy is not an escape from the pain of life; it is a reconsideration and reinvestment in life from a different, liberating perspective.

For Paul, joy is a discipline of perception, not an emotion dependent on circumstances. Rev. Stephen Fowl calls joy “a response formed in those who can read the economy of God's activity in particular ways and are able to act in conformity with that unfolding story.”

Reach for Christian joy, Paul is telling Euodia and Syntyche. Work through this fight, your faith is bigger than this conflict. Feel the joy you both share as Christians.

Rev. Nathan Eddy says this about Paul's letter to the Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always,” writes Paul. It sounds so simple, yet his joy is profoundly counter-cultural in North American society today. We think of joy as a private overflow of

good feeling in response to happy circumstances. Joy is the point of life, a right even: “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” But for Paul, joy is shared, not individual; a byproduct, not an end in itself; a discipline, not a right; a command, not an option.”

Community is hard. Communities of faith are hard. Churches are famous for having conflicts, hurting feelings, alienating people, and losing members.

I acknowledge all of that. It’s true. But community is also what makes us grow, deepen our faith, and become our best selves. Community is where we learn and push. Community is where transformation happens.

Community helps us go on when we face loss, illness, loneliness or grief.

And community is where we find and express joy. I’m with Paul. I don’t think joy is an individual feeling, I think it is a shared experience.

In one of his poems, Wendell Berry writes, “Be joyful, though you have considered all the facts.”

Well, I have considered all the facts. And I choose community with all its challenges.

I have considered all the facts. And I choose our list of problems over those in other faith communities.

I have considered all the facts. And I choose YOU as the people with whom I want to walk this spiritual journey.

With you I struggle. And with you, I share great JOY.

Amen.