

The Church and the Science of Spokes

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Philippians 2:1-11

Many of you know I begin a three month sabbatical on Tuesday and that Greg and I will leave for Guatemala later this week. As you can imagine my list of things to attend to is rather lengthy.

But recently I spent time with a friend whose list is much longer than mine. In fact, she admitted to feeling completely overwhelmed by her list, and also by her life. Many pieces of her life are indeed burdensome. Some are hard to carry, she realized, because they are completely out of her control. Her list contains, among other things, needing to attend to a family member's serious illness, significant behavioral challenges with her children, a strained relationship with her boss at work, as well as nagging and frightening financial concerns. Something she said stuck with me. "I don't know how to hold it all together."

Many of us know what she's talking about. Our lives are so full and complex today. There are so many different pieces to it that demand our attention. Work, family, relationships, church responsibilities, keeping up with news and world affairs, (and perhaps Face Book, Instagram, and Twitter), keeping up with our kid's schedules and activities (and our grandkids), caring for aging parents, dealing with illness or injury – not to mention attending to our own spiritual and emotional health and needs. Perhaps you resonate too with my friend's words, "I don't know how to hold it all together."

And it isn't only keeping our personal lives together that presents a challenge. Paul's letter is a reminder this morning that holding ourselves together as the church, that being united to one another, that being one in Spirit and in purpose – is also something that can seem nearly impossible.

That's what Paul is thinking about here in our text. How is it possible for the church in Philippi, with all the various people coming into it, Romans and Jews, rich and poor, business folks and peasants, educated and not-so-educated, to hold it all together? You can imagine Paul, who was writing this letter from prison, mulling over that question for the church he loved so much in Philippi.

But the question is also ours. Paul's words echo down through the canyons of time and address the concerns of every church, of our church. "How do we hold all our pieces and parts, all our passions and preferences, all our backgrounds and battle scars, all our ideas and idiosyncrasies, all our convictions and certainties, all our pain and joy, all our weaknesses and strengths ...how do we hold it all together to fully be the loving community Christ calls us to be?"

In the eleven verses we just read Paul addresses that question. And one of the ways he answers it is to say - we can't. We cannot do it. We cannot hold the church together. But Christ, who unites us, who is our center, can.

I think it's helpful as we think about this to picture the wheel of a bike. It's amazing, I think, how a bike wheel works. It seems crazy to me that the scrawny little spokes of a bike wheel could possibly hold up under the weight of, let's say, your 300 pound neighbor! I don't completely understand how those skinny little metal toothpicks can hold up under that weight without collapsing or being crushed. But what I've learned is that it has a lot to do with the spokes being connected, centered, anchored, secured to the hub of the wheel AND with those spokes being positioned rightly in relation to the other spokes. That makes all the difference.

It's similar for the church, I think. Friends, sorry to say, but you and I are sort of like those scrawny spokes when it comes to the church.

Our own ability to do ministry, to live out the gospel of grace, our ability to care for one another and remain united in faith, hope and love, is so much less about us than it is about our being united to Christ. Christ is our center. Christ holds each of our lives secure in his own life and at the same time holds us all securely together. How can we be the like-minded loving community Christ calls us to be?" We can't. But Christ, in whom our frail lives and feeble strength are anchored, unites us and holds us together with his powerful love.

In our text Paul gives us, as a church, some important ways we live into that reality. To do that well, Paul indicates we need to see ourselves rightly, we need to see others rightly, and we need to see Christ leading us.

So first – seeing ourselves rightly.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit," says Paul. "Rather, in humility value others above yourselves..."

Seeing ourselves rightly has to do, says Rev. Scott Hozee, with humility and simple honesty. In commenting on this text he writes, "... at base true humility is simple honesty. William Law used to talk about "the reasonableness of humility." What he meant is that humility is simply a sane, sober, honest recognition that we're all pretty much the same. We all have things we do well and things we do not do so well; we all have gifts in some areas but not in others. Humility is simply the rational recognition of these common-sense facts. Pride, on the other hand, is irrational—it's insane to think you're the center of the universe, crazy to believe that you could get along just fine without other people. It's sick to think that everyone should pay attention to you in a way that you yourself never pay attention to others.

"Humility connects us to others," says Hozee, "even as pride isolates us." Humility isn't our favorite virtue. When proud parents show off their new born baby, they don't say, "Yeah, he's so precious. We really hope he'll grow up to be humble." (What they don't know is that he may just grow up to make them humble.)

Paul says, Christ, who was in the form of God, took the form of a slave. The King James Version says, "He made himself of no reputation." "Can you imagine that?" asks the preacher Fleming Rutledge. "Most of us are forever trying to inflate our reputations. Most of us are jealous of

others who are more successful, more accomplished, better looking, better athletes, taller, richer, whatever. The Son of God made himself of no reputation at all.”

The late Dr. Bill Spoelhof, former president of Calvin College, well respected in this community and a man of deep faith, was a member of my previous congregation. In his later years, he was regularly visited by those serving in a ministry similar to LaGrave’s deaconesses. At the conclusion of a visit made by two members, one of them offered to pray for Dr. Spoelhof. He affirmed that idea. But after she had prayed and said Amen Dr. Spoelhof said, “That was a lovely prayer. Thank you very much. But, I should have mentioned this earlier. I think the Lord knows me as Bill.”

Seeing ourselves rightly helps us find our strength in being connected to the hub, who is Christ AND in having our lives rightly aligned with others.

So how does that happen? It happens when we see others rightly.

The scholar NT Wright tells the story of having lunch with a friend who had invited about twenty or thirty people. Some of them were quite well known public figures. Many were not. As his friend opened in prayer at the start of the meal, he also said, very firmly, ‘Remember: the most interesting person in the room is the one you’re sitting next to.’”

It’s the Spirit of Christ, our center, who helps us see others, especially others whom we assume we have nothing in common with or nothing to learn from, as precious objects of God’s affection, as those for whom Christ gave up heaven and laid down his own life.

C. S. Lewis, in his book *The Weight of Glory*, thinking about the perfect beings we’ll one day be in Christ, writes, “It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship.... It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics.”

When Lewis, once known as a sort of stuffy intellectual, came to faith as an older adult and first started going to church he very much disliked the hymns, which he considered to be fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music. But as he continued, he said this, “I realized that the hymns ... were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in ... boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize,” Lewis said, “that you aren’t fit to clean those boots. ”

Seeing ourselves and others rightly keeps bringing us back to Christ, whose power alone can hold us all together, can hold together our lives and can hold together the church God loves so much.

You know, when Christ Jesus emptied himself and took the form of a servant, we saw God and the way God works more clearly. When Jesus walked the path of obedience all the way to the cross, when he looked not to his own interests but to ours, we became witnesses to the very

nature of God. And here's the hopeful truth, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ Jesus, is still alive and at work in and among us.

The prophet Isaiah said of the coming Christ that a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.

So this we can know as a church who desires to be the loving community Christ calls us to be, that whenever we are unselfish with our time, whenever we humbly seek out the bruised reed or smoldering wick, whenever we move toward the one who is most hard to love, or listen carefully with an open heart to the one with whom we already know we disagree, whenever the interests of others are considered as important as our own, Christ, our center, is leading us.

I see Christ leading us when I see you as a congregation sing with deep devotion, boots or no boots. I know Christ is the center of our church when in an elders meeting, one of the elders (often someone with a very busy life) prays for the entire list of people under his or her care and carves time from their calendar to call and visit the folks on that list. I know Christ is leading when you, the LaGrave congregation offer your time, talents, treasures in multiple ways for the sake of others.

Friends, it is a joy to see Christ at our center and to see him leading us to the day when every knee will bow... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord - to the glory of God the Father. Amen

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