

September 28, 2008

Philippians 2:2-8 (from *The Message* a modern translation)

“Being Deep Spirited Friends”

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## Philippians 2

**2:1** If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care -

**2:2** then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends.

**2:3** Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead.

**2:4** Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.

**2:5** Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself.

**2:6** He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what.

**2:7** Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human!

**2:8** Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death - and the worst kind of death at that: a crucifixion.

Some of us have had the experience of a friend or family member who “gets religion” one day, wrecking that friendship or family bond, the next day. One summer in 1979 I had a good friend at work, a square dance caller, a fun guy, but also a very nice guy, a decent guy who went home one weekend and “got religion” and when he came back to work, everything had changed. He preached, he scolded, he argued. He found out I was a Roman Catholic and told me the pope was the Antichrist and I was doomed to hell. He did not call dances or joke around, any more. By the end of the summer, he had decided he would have to formally “shun” all of us who had been his friends. And from that time on, I never saw him again.

It is this sort of extremism, this sort of judgment that so many people experience, or fear, when you declare yourself a “Christian”. For many in this church, it is some sort of judgment or shunning that has wounded them, and disgusted some others, and infuriated still others of us.

This is not the face of faith that we believe. This is not the faith we cherish. That is not what we practice here.

As people of progressive faith, we believe that God loves and cherishes all creation, all peoples. God speaks and acts through the many religions and mystics, prophets and mysteries of the world. Jesus is our mystic Teacher, prophet and Lord, our Saving One, our God with us, to teach and to heal and to save us from aimlessness and sin. But God is not done with the world or with the healing of it. And so, unlike my extremist friend from school days; we neither shun, nor deny the wideness of God's mercy, nor the creativity of God in speaking to us, sheltering us, leading all of us to wholeness and peace, everywhere in the world.

I love the stories of the Exodus and of the grumbling people in the wilderness because of that very effort of God to be patient with us and to love us in our obstinacy! Surely, that Jewish rabble, leaving Egypt, were a trying bunch. Yet still, we hear, in the reading this morning from Exodus 17 that God knows and responds to the people in their neediness and their whininess. First it is the cry for leadership and Moses and Aaron and Miriam come forward, then it is the cry for a community life, and the Commandments are given. In all their needs: from freedom, to order, to bread, and meat, and water: their needs are met.

There is another need too, that we hear of in the Philippians reading: the need to know the closeness and the depth of the love of God. And that very depth of the love of God is manifested for us in the knowledge that God is not, will not, chooses to not be separated from us. And so, in Jesus, we can see the closeness of the love of God. In Jesus, we can experience the presence of God with us, ever more intimately. There is no distance any more.

In Exodus, God spoke on a mountaintop in terror and spoke.  
In Jesus, God speaks through a human life, with love and passion.  
And through Jesus we discover that the message of God to humankind is a call to deep friendship, deep caring, deep generosity, deep service.

Way beyond what was comfortable; Jesus befriended us.  
Way beyond what was safe; Jesus loved us.  
Way beyond the limitations of power and safety; Jesus made himself vulnerable for us.  
And so, hate and fear killed him.  
And Love raised him.

So that God could show us, in yet another way, the strength of the love that will not shun us, leave us, despise us, or deny us.

In Jesus we have found our place at the table of God. In Jesus we have heard the word of our welcome into the household of God.

And Paul begs the Philippians to remember and to model such a life of love and of welcome.

There is urgency in Paul. There is urgency in me. This message of selfless loving, of generous deep friendship with God and Jesus Christ: this is deeply and profoundly needed in the world today.

There is no pain, no shame, no sorrow, no brokenness that can separate us from the love of God.

Jesus, as God with us, knows it all; the hurts, the exclusions, the shame, the cruelty and the death that is in the hands of people, towards other people.

And none of that can overcome the love of God, the love of Jesus.

It is urgent that the message of the powerful love of God be heard: it overcomes even hatred and death, overcomes the cruelty of judgment, exclusion and shunning. This is an urgent message.

This is the message of Westminster.

This is so important for those who have not heard yet of this powerful deep abiding love.

It is so important that the message of the deep spirited friendships formed here, between and among us, be shared with others.

There are so many who know nothing of the God who is generous with the grumblers, faithful even to the worst of us, loving even the most unlovable of us.

The message of Jesus, through you, the people of Westminster, is so urgently needed in our city: where hatreds divide us, and judgment breaks us, and fear isolates us.

This is our vocation, Westminster.

We must continue to joyfully share that there is good news in being a “Christian”. That there is extravagant welcome and there are open arms and open minds in the community of Christ. It is great good news that you are

welcome here at Westminster, straight, gay or transgender; young or old, sick or well, rich or poor. It is great good news when we can say, “no matter who you are or where you are on your faith journey, you are welcome here.”

Let us support **this** message, support **this** Christianity, let us support **this** church as fully, as deeply as we can; so that the good news of Jesus is known in Spokane through **this** church, Westminster Congregational United Church of Christ.