

Good morning,

I'm humbled to be able to share my thoughts this morning. Many of you know that I'm an English and drama teacher by training. As a drama teacher a core principle is the "magic if." So, as the actor Danielle Radcliffe prepared to play Harry Potter, he would immerse himself in the "IF" of being a young wizard. How would he act "if" he were really able to cast spells? How would he behave "if" he were faced with a three-headed dog? How would he speak "if" speaking to Voldemort? The word "if" is the heart of imagination. Interestingly, last week, Dan mentioned that discord is caused by a failure of imagination.

When I read and reread and immersed myself in various translations of Philippians 2: 1-11, I was looking through that lens. The power of "if".

Most scholars believe that Paul was imprisoned in Rome as he wrote this letter to the Philippians. This is from The Message translation:

2 1-4 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*—then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. 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. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.

5-8 Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. 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. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human!* 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.

9-11 Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.

Please pray with me: Creating, redeeming, and sustaining God, you said, "when two or more are gathered in my name, I am there." Be with us now as we reflect on how best to follow You.

At the beginning of Paul's letter, he repeats the word "IF" five times. How can we not take note of that. "if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you..." I think of this community. There are so many examples of what being in this community has done for me: the satisfaction of working alongside sweet Gingy Hyler during Family Promise and sheltering unhoused families in our church, the peace of having Jane Hogan and many other deacons show up on our doorstep with dinner when my husband Bruce was undergoing cancer treatment. The joy of working in the kitchen alongside Jane DeMarios, Cathy Johnson, Wally Congdon and leageans of other helpers as we prepared for a Presbyteri gathering. How many times have I been reduced to tears, joyful or sorrowful, by the sacred music created by all of our inspired musicians?

Really, I imagine that most of us answered in the affirmative to parts of the beginning of Paul's letter. The way Paul writes it is a conditional if-then construct. If this, then that. Let's look again at the "that".

Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. 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.

I'm really struck by the phrase "be deep-spirited friends."

Earlier in the summer when Dan was preaching, he asked us to shout out some of the signs of the political rancor in our world. Somebody said that we have lost the ability to have civil discourse; somebody else said that we always feel like we are walking in a minefield. This summer I have also been re-reading a number of dystopian texts: *A Handmaid's Tale*, 1984, and *Fahrenheit 451*. These dystopian societies have in

common that people can't trust each other. Really, they are trained to distrust each other. In these novels, one's friends or family or children can report behavior not acceptable to the totalitarian government and then one goes to jail or just disappears. In the case of Orwell's *1984*, Winston Smith is tortured in Room 101 with his worst fear: rats.

I certainly am not a fan of rats, and what I might suggest that is even worse than rats is an underlying suspicion of other people. However, in this age of identity politics and political rancor aren't many of us suspicious of each other? Rather than doing as instructed by the Bible and being "deep-spirited friends" don't we engage in what Brene Brown refers to as "common-enemy intimacy"?

Dr. Brene Brown is a researcher, professor and writer. She also attends an Episcopal church, much like ours: politically diverse where there is a space at the table for everyone. She writes that:

"Common-enemy intimacy is counterfeit connection and the opposite of true belonging. If the bond we share with others is simply that we hate the same people, the intimacy we experience is often intense, immediately gratifying, and an easy way to discharge outrage and pain. It is not, however, fuel for real connection. It's fuel that runs hot, burns fast, and leaves a trail of polluted emotion."

For me what Brown teaches about counterfeit connections resonated. When I am deeply embroiled in political conversation, it is immediately gratifying. It is an easy way to discharge outrage and pain. When I am railing against the most recent callous statement by this politician or that pundit, I can form a quick "common enemy intimacy" with others. I love that Brown writes that it leaves a "trail of polluted emotion."

Alternatively, Paul calls the Philippians, and by extension us to be "deep-spirited" friends. This type of relationship seems to be the antithesis of the suspicion of dystopias or "common-enemy intimacy." Dr. Hilton, in his book, *A House United*, reflects on this idea as well.

He writes that his book "exists to propose a fourth Christian mission: being one, as Jesus prayed." Hilton continues to write that people will "know that God loves them here, not by our evangelism or our service or our advocacy, but by the way we love one another" (217-218). Loving one another toward the unity of deep-spirited friendship. It is easy to say, and so much harder to do. Our passage from Philippians certainly gives us direction. Paul advises, "Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself." Paul reminds us that Jesus' life was an "incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life." We know that Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. We don't have the practice of foot washing in our society. I might suggest, though, that really taking the time to listen to another person is the 2024 equivalent of foot washing. So often we listen so that we can have our turn to speak or show off how clever we are or minimize another's humanity.

Dan has at times asked us to reflect on who in our lives shows us Christ's love. Would you indulge me and take a moment, close your eyes and think of a person in your life who listens to you the way that Christ washed His disciples' feet? A person who listens to you as a deep-spirited friend. Not to fuel common-enemy intimacy, not to get ahead, but to listen in order to love us in a way that reminds us that "God loves us here."

For me, that person is my late sister Cindy, who regardless of how busy she was would listen in a way that suggested that nothing else was quite as important as you. [While Cindy and I didn't always agree on political issues, abortion for example; we loved each other as Paul encouraged. I had nothing but admiration for her serving as a foster mother for more than 20 infants and opening her home to women faced with crisis pregnancies. She appreciated that I served as a role model of female ferocity for her daughters.](#) In conversation, she possessed the Christ-like humility that affirmed that you were a person who had a treasure trove of amusing stories, profound pain, and important wisdom. Since her death, I often reflect that throughout her life, in her intimate, humble listening, she was washing the feet of her family, patients, and community.

Thinking back to the "magic if" of theatrical artists, the "if" that births imagination. What if we led with humility? What if we worked to show each other that we are beloved and forgiven? What if we truly acted like a person striving to emulate Jesus?

Perhaps as we live into this upcoming season, what if we strive for that Christ-like humility. Christ, who had equal status with God but chose to wash feet. In each moment, and in each conversation, we will be served to consider the writer James Baldwin's words, "There is never time in the future in which we will work out our salvation. The challenge is in the moment; the time is always now."