

## 12 Reflections to Aid Discernment” October 31- November 12 2016

Monday October 31, 2016 Read Phil. 2: 1-8; 12-13

*“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who emptied Himself, ...humbled Himself... and became obedient even to the point of death....Therefore, work out your salvation with fear and trembling , for it is God Who is at work ...enabling you both to will and to work for His good pleasure”*

Any time a group of people works together, there are going to be many ideas about how to get the job done. There will even be different ideas about the purpose and the desired outcomes, and when the different sides are intractable it's almost impossible to accomplish anything. Paul was dealing with the same kinds of situations in this church in Philippi. There were people arguing about Christian education, and the leadership. There were people arguing about worship. So in this portion of the letter, Paul wanted to say something to all the groups who were trying to get the upper hand. He wanted to address and change the *attitude* behind all the conflicts going on.

Paul said, Jesus deliberately let go of *power* as His operating principle. Jesus took the role of a servant, to embody for us, altruistic love – being willing to be the first to do unto others as I would have them do unto me. In so many of His teachings, Jesus sets the bar at *being the first* to do for another person.

In verse 3 Paul said, “ *be of the same mind , have the same love and be in full accord*”. It may sound like he's calling for concurrence, but he's not. Instead he is calling for collaboration. Concurrence is having the same thoughts and convictions, and we see that wasn't true in Philippi. Collaboration means having the same destination; to labor together in a *common* direction. Once that is settled, the “how we get there's” are open to negotiation To settle that requires what Paul called, “emptying ourselves”. It means giving up the need to “do it my way”, and that's what makes obedience possible –which literally means to listen, pay attention, and act accordingly, in this case, to God.

So how does this help us deal with divisions? What does this passage say about discernment? Paul is saying is that in the Body of Christ we are called to walk in the same direction. Having the same mind is about having the same commitment to following Gods will. Full accord is about being fully committed *to each other*. Once that is settled, God can help us both to know His will, and can empower us to do it!

Prayer; *Lord Jesus, it is encouraging to know that You know us completely having walked through Your life in our shoes. Help us to love each other “as You love us” especially in times of disagreement . Show us how to discern Your will for us and our church Amen.*

Tuesday November 1<sup>st</sup> Read John 10: 1-11a

*“When the good Shepherd calls His own sheep by name, the sheep follow Him because they know His voice...”.*

If we look closely at this parable, it's not really so much about us, ( the sheep)as it is about Jesus. When Jesus called Himself a good Shepherd, He was saying something about the kind of Leader He is for us. Jesus was certainly a commanding presence- but He was never about making people cringe. He never provoked guilt or shame, or mindless allegiance. His power, was always used to make us *become more* - more alive, more holy, more loving. More like Himself.

But there's another side to His leadership that is implicit in this parable. As our Shepherd, He never intended that we would just graze in green, pastures. He didn't save us to spend time in a church once a week. . This parable of the sheep, is also about our *calling*. Just as sheep trust and follow their shepherd wherever he leads them, Jesus challenges us to decide whether we will follow Him, *wherever* He wants us to go, whatever He wants us to do.

There was a program on WXXI recently about a shepherd, and His flock. The thing that was amazing was the level of trust the sheep had. As he was leading them to pasture they came to a river with level four rapids. The sheep gathered on the shore. The shepherd found the best place to cross, but it still looked pretty threatening. He waded in and called, and they all *leaped* in -even the youngest little lambs.

The question this parable asks us to consider is, "Will we trust Him over and above all the other voices that are always vying for our attention?. If I know it is His voice calling, *do I trust Him enough to obey?*

This parable is fundamentally about prayer; and *listening* for the Spirit. This is discernment. Sometimes what God wants just seems right. But sometimes when it's more challenging, it is more of a strong nudge and it usually is an opportunity for us to make our next step of spiritual growth. Discernment asks, "What is the Holy Spirit saying to us about our situation? Where does *God* want us to go from here?

Prayer: *Jesus, help us to hear Your voice both in stillness, and above the competing voices we hear. Help us to grow in the ways You know we need. Give us the courage to leap in faith when You call. Amen.*

Wednesday November 2<sup>nd</sup> Read Hosea 11: 1-11

*"When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.."*

The verse above is a reminder of God's liberating work; first in the Exodus and then with hindsight, Jesus returning to Israel after fleeing Herod's wrath. The purpose behind this verse for Israel and the Church is, God is calling us to remember our roots. God is calling us to remember how we all have been liberated from slavery. For Christians this verse refers to our spiritual liberation from everything that can keep our souls in chains. Whatever our personal Egypt's might be , Jesus Christ can free us from them

But more than this, this 11<sup>th</sup> chapter points to *reason behind* the Exodus.

When God spoke of the way Israel worshiped other gods and turned from the ways God taught them to walk and live, God was reminding them that they weren't brought out of Egypt only for their own sake. God made them a nation to show the rest of the world what it's like to be raised by a loving Father. God made them a nation so that others might see what it's like to live God's way in the world -

IN this 11<sup>th</sup> chapter God is reprimanding Israel and the Church when most of what we do is for ourselves. That's what Israel was doing As a nation they were *refusing* to live by the house rules. But God 's response was essentially, I brought you up to be daughters and sons that would carry the family name into the world. I brought you up to show the world how I raised you to be; faithful, loving, just, hospitable - people who contribute to the world's goodness and peace. I brought you up to show the world who I am and what I want for the world.

That's our calling too. God is offering us a corrective against maintaining the status quo. I can choose to ignore God's purpose. Yet God will keep offering us the alternative. There's that phrase at the end of the chapter that says, God will roar like a lion. It is important to realize it is not the roar of an angry lion. It's the roar of a lion that is calling for us to get back in line with who we are called to be. In a voice as unmistakable as a lion's, God is calling us to be the Church and show people how to be free from whatever Egypt's they are slaves to, and how to know and follow the Lord.

*Prayer: Holy God, , there are no sufficient words to express our gratitude to You for our liberation. There is nothing we can do to repay You for that gift. But we can give our hearts and our lives to serve Your Purpose Amen.*

Thursday November 3<sup>rd</sup> Read Eph. 3:14-20

*“To Him Who by the power at work within us, is able  
.to accomplish more than we can imagine”*

In this part of Paul's letter, he is recounting how God's love knows no bounds. This was a new revelation for him- because we can see in some of his earlier letters how he struggled with a divine courtroom understanding of God's judgment. But his letters also reveal that he was growing more and more in his understanding of this good news about God's unconditional love. It's a love, Paul said here in Ephesians, that is higher than the sky and deeper than the ocean, and if we can truly receive it, it is the best truth we will ever know. When I realize how completely I am loved, I'll find that I am more and more capable of growth and progress in my faith and life- because I'll no longer be motivated by *fear*.

Jesus talked about fear a lot in his ministry, because it drives so many areas of life. We are driven by the fears that our culture feeds us. We're driven by our fears of scarcity – even when the commodity that might be scarce is the latest cellphone or toy. Fear of not having enough, feeds into a competitive spirit. We can't trust anybody because everybody is out to get us. The result of such fear leads to things like, bullying,

scapegoating, and when taken further, to oppression and injustice. Jesus taught, these fears are counterproductive and unnecessary because if we can see how much love and care God has for the birds and the flowers, then we can realize how much God loves us and how God will care for our true needs.

The great news Paul said, is that *knowing God's love* in the depths of our being releases a power within us that is able to *accomplish abundantly more than we can ask or imagine*. Knowing God's love is what made it possible for Paul to work as hard as he did, and to feel blessed even in a prison cell. When our love for God is the motive behind how we live and what we do – it bears great fruit. It makes doing ministry less burdensome because when we're working out of love, Christ is right there beside us, sharing the load.

Prayer: *Oh God, , help us to know and experience the unconditional and unlimited love You have for us. Knowing it truly, help us to show the same to one another in the church, and in the world. Amen.*

Friday November 4<sup>th</sup> Read Luke 10: 25-37

*"Who was the neighbor? The One who showed mercy. Go and Do the same"*

This story of the Good Samaritan is one that confronted the religious establishment which was devoting itself to maintaining the so called purity codes of the Jewish faith. Those purity codes drew some hard lines around acceptable and unacceptable people. Anyone who wasn't Jewish was unacceptable, and Samaritans were especially offensive because they believed that the holiest place on earth was in Samaria instead of Jerusalem. People who were poor, or sick, or even injured like the man at the side of the road, were abhorrent. There were hundreds of rules about food, clothing, rituals and more, an infraction of which rendered a person unclean, and unwelcome in the temple and community. Unfortunately that kind of religious behavior isn't over. People in the Church today have their own purity codes that draw lines between those who belong, and those who don't. People divide themselves over interpreting the bible, and doctrines, and traditions. People in the Church draw lines based on behavior, dress codes, education, class, gender, culture and race. People in the Church draw lines that enable them to "pass by" other people in the same congregation.

The point is, each of these lines people draw is an infraction of the gospel. The gospel of Christ crosses all the lines we might draw – no matter what they are. This story says that God's true religion calls me *towards* people, and human need and justice rather than away from them. It's a new way of living that can always be measured by how well we're *practicing* the love of God, and neighbor. At the heart of God's purpose for each of us, is the realization that every person matters, and I'm responsible for every person's well-being – no exceptions! That is the message of Jesus story – and we obey it because we realize God accepts us as we are and cares for our well-being; mind, body and spirit (next page)

What does this have to do with discernment? A strong sub-text of this story is found in this new PCUSA motto: “ It’s more important to do the right things, than to do things right

God’s agenda is characterized by health , wholeness, security, justice, peace. Doing the right thing is a strong guideline for whatever we think about doing in terms of God’s will. Does what we plan to do promote spiritual vitality and new life – like being reborn? Does it advocate for the environment? Do my words and deeds uphold the dignity of every human being? Do we oppose any policy isn’t helpful to the poor and the elderly and the sick? Do we fight for every human being that is oppressed because of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or anything else because they are my neighbor, and God calls me to love them? Jesus asks us the same question he asked the man who wanted to justify himself. Who was the neighbor?

Let us pray...*Lord Jesus, Your call to discipleship is costly, and yet you tell us that we find the best most satisfying life by turning over one life to receive a greater one. Help us to become the neighbors who do the right thing. Amen*

Saturday November 5<sup>th</sup> Read Hebrews 11: 1-3; 8-12

*“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out, ... not knowing where he was going”*

There is a certain kind of faith the author of Hebrews was pointing toward in the first 3 verses. He said its’ the assurance of things hoped for and confidence in what I can’t see He pointed to creation itself, “*the universe I can see was created by powers and processes I can’t see*”. Someone once said that faith is having an invisible means of support, and that is what these initial 3 verses are about. It is the power *behind* having hope when nothing seems to be supporting it.. It is the kind of faith that believes a positive outcome is possible, regardless of what my eyes tell me.

Abrahams’ journey was used as an example of what following God is like, and it is essentially a *pilgrimage*. A pilgrimage is a journey taken to deepen my faith through prayer and contemplation in holy places. The purpose for going on a pilgrimage, is to help me become someone new. A pilgrimage is designed to help us learn new ways of living and being a community that embodies new hopes for the world. Spiritually speaking, being a pilgrim is about taking the risk of being real with God and committing to our faith community, even when it’s difficult. It’s about the hard work of growing in faith and service *together*.

In the rest of the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter that relates God’s unfolding story of salvation over the previous centuries, in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter, the author charged his readers, the church, to join the same movement into the future. He encouraged them with the following words, “*Therefore since you are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, lay aside every sin and weight, and run the race that is set before us looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.*” God is inviting us to take the road of a hopeful faith, and it is an

invitation – it is up to each of us what is chosen. God is challenging us to follow the example of that great cloud of witnesses and especially Abraham – to step out into a journey trusting God to show us the next leg of the journey and the next and the next, until we reach the destination God has in mind.

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, as I pray today, help me to recall the witnesses who have helped me grow closer to You in my church. Help us to join the cloud of witnesses whose hope, courage and faith have paved the way for us to this day. Help us to pave Your way for the future Amen.*

Monday November 7<sup>th</sup> Read 1 Cor. 12: 27-30

*Are all apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers...?*

The fact that the Church of Christ is most like a living, functioning organism is why Paul came up with the metaphor of the Body of Christ. It is not a building. We become part of this organism by however we came to be embraced by the love and grace of Christ. Earlier in this 12<sup>th</sup> chapter, that is what Paul means when he said, “No one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit”. In other words Jesus becomes our Lord through the working of the Spirit in the mind and heart.

From that starting point Paul lays out some realities about the church in chapter 12 verses 4-7 He said, There are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, and varieties of service but the same Lord, and varieties of activity but the same God who activates them all. All of this is the back-ground to the verses above..

In verse 27, Paul points to a powerful truth. When he said we all are the body of Christ he’s saying that we are a *unity* - joined to one another by the blessed ties that bind us. Then Paul said we all are *individually* members of it” which means we are a *diversity* – like the different parts of a body – that is, different people with different personalities and gifts and thoughts. Furthermore, when he listed the gifts and asked the rhetorical question “Are we all apostles, teachers, and miracle workers?”- he was saying that it is our different-ness which makes the church, a "fit and healthy" body. Paul was *celebrating* the "one-of-a-kindness" that each of us brings to the church community. In these verses Paul was describing a *diversity* that lives within an ever moving and changing *unity*.

The aspect of this passage that speaks to the quality of discernment, is that we all have gifts of the Spirit, to bless the life of the church. Some of us are organizers. Some of us are the details people. Some of us are visionaries and some are the hands on people . Some are the hospitable people, and some are the managers. *We each have a part to play and we all have a part to play.* The trick is to let or get each of us do our part Part of discerning the will of God in community is to avail ourselves of each other’s gifts and permit them to be exercised.

*Prayer: Spirit of God, help us to receive the gifts You have for us. Help us each to play our part as You have gifted us to do . Amen.*

Tuesday November 8th, . Jeremiah 18: 1-6 “ *The Lord said to Jeremiah, Go down to the potter’s house, and there I will speak to you; So I went, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled , so he reworked it into another vessel. Then the Lord said to me,” Can I not do with you O house of Israel as this potter has done? For just like the clay in the potter’s hand, you O house of Israel, are in my hands.”*

The big question, Jeremiah raises for each of us today is, “Am I willing to be like putty in God’s hands?” If I say that I’m willing, I also have to be aware that it’s not a done deal once and for all. Most of the time, my spiritual growth is going to be like peeling an onion – every layer, every lesson learned, every part of life that gets turned over to God for transformation, is like putting myself into the Potter’s hands again. God is faithful – to make sure that nothing can get in the way of the final product, if I will surrender to God’s work in my life.

It is so important to remember that our growth never requires that I have it all together. All it requires is that we keep moving! Following Jesus is a lifelong journey, and growing up in the spiritual life, happens in stages..

Next, the spiritual transformation God described to Jeremiah is also supposed to be a community endeavor. Remember, God was asking *all of Israel* if they were willing to be like clay in His hands. There is a proverb that says, “As seeds become trees, so communities of faith are continually becoming what God already sees.” That is the artistry of a potter isn’t it? Somehow a potter can look at that shapeless lump of clay and see what it can become. In order for God’s dream for our church to come true, we only have to be willing to let go and let God do his work.

The promise is that if we keep putting ourselves and our church into God’s hands – like clay –God will mold us in ways that will ensure His will among us and through us for His kingdom’s sake!

Reflect on these words in silence for a minute or two and ask God to show you one thing to surrender to God in your personal life. Then ask God to show you one thing to surrender to God regarding our church. Pray in your own words or use the prayer below.

Prayer *O God, sometimes it’s frightening to let You take our lives, and our church into Your hands. Help us to trust You just enough to take our next steps whatever they may be . We give thanks for the promise that You always have plans for us that are Good and Holy so that we have “a future and a hope” ... Amen.*

Wednesday November 9<sup>th</sup>

*“Do not be deceived, we must take God’s ways seriously, because we reap what we sow. If we plant corruption we ‘ll harvest corruption. But if we plant the things that are life-giving - things of the Spirit – then we harvest life - now and forever. So let us*

*persevere in doing good because we'll reap its' fruits if we don't give up. So whenever there is opportunity let us work for the good of all. " (paraphrased) Gal. 6:7-10*

In our country's halls we inscribe the phrase "In God we trust, " and it was never meant to be just a slogan inscribed on our walls. It is meant to be a relationship - it is meant to be a reality by which we live our lives. It is meant to be a fundamental reliance on truths and a wisdom beyond our own, and the strength to live by them. In this portion of Paul's letter he said that we should persevere in doing good – but not for the usual reason. Usually Paul would say that we should do well in response to, God's love and grace towards us. But here Paul is saying that we should do well because we reap what we sow.

IN other words, we have to consider well the actions we take because there are consequences for being short- sighted or careless Living in the realization there is Someone greater than myself to whom I owe my allegiance, can make a huge difference in everything I do. The question is, Do I believe In God seriously enough so that it could make a difference?

This lesson has a message for us as a church. First of all it's important to know that God understands everything we feel as members of this church – the fear of loss, the declining rolls and checking accounts. God understands the feelings that are still in our hearts from every event, every baptism ,every potluck dinner and activity that's ever happened in these walls that contributed to life as we know it today.

But do we trust God enough to let go of some things and welcome new things as You offer them to us? Do we trust God enough to ask for His will, and then follow when He reveals it?

*Prayer: Merciful God, we believe in You. Increase our faith, our commitment to You, and each other, for the sake of our church, its' life, and mission. Amen*

Thursday November 10<sup>th</sup> Read John 16: 12-15

*"The Spirit will guide you into truth... and declare to you the things that are to come"*

There are at least 2 meanings to this verse. In the first place, Jesus was teaching his followers that an authentic, faith is not primarily subscribing to a set of beliefs, or meticulous practices. By referring to the *Spirit* of truth, Jesus is teaching that living by God's ways is more like a way of seeing. Jesus said that the Spirit will be present in my heart so that my obedience to God will be a matter of how I learn to make sense in my life, according to Jesus' ways and teachings. In other words, the Spirit will keep instructing me and helping me to apply those instructions in my daily life.

In the second place, God knows that there are a million voices in the world telling us what to do and what to trust. Sometimes it seems like there are a million voices in our heads, pulling us one way and then another. When that happens, it can be so hard to make decisions



Jesus said, the Spirit is given to help us find a greater perspective, *beyond* our fears and doubts. The Spirit is given, Jesus said, so that our faith in God can actually be a powerful ally for making our way through the times when difficult decisions and directions are hard to discern. The Spirit, if we will make ourselves available, will gently but persistently keep revealing what God is after for us and *from* us. One of the most important growth areas in the Christian life is learning to distinguish the voice of the Spirit, but it is easy in the sense that we only have to be *willing* to follow.

The last part of the verse above is often used to mean the return of Christ to set up His kingdom. That is *not* what it is referring to. It is about the Spirit declaring to us the things that God is desiring to bring about - the things that *are to come*. It is about the way the Spirit helps us to see and hear what God is calling us to do and be. The thing is it's up to us too.. If we will follow our callings we'll find that resources will be given to strengthen our efforts to do God's will. But it's a collaboration – because it must be. God chooses to work His purposes out as year succeeds to year *through us*.

Prayer: *We give thanks for the presence of the Spirit in our lives. Teach us how to have ears to hear His voice. Teach us how to have open and receptive hearts to all His gifts Amen*

Friday November 11<sup>th</sup> Read 1 Cor. 13: 1-13

*“Love bears, believes, hopes, endures, all things “*

Contrary to popular usage this 13<sup>th</sup> chapter was written to address the issues of a conflict-ridden, spiteful, hostile church. Everybody was at each other's throats. Each group considered themselves holier and generally superior to the others. Paul, rather than trying to persuade each group regarding the content of their positions, wrote about the one thing that could possibly correct all of them simultaneously.

The first verse was written to the charismatic, Christians who believed that others in the church who didn't manifest that the gift of tongues were losers. Without love, he said, having that gift is about as useful as banging pots and pans together. Verses 2-3 were written to the “my faith's bigger than your faith” folks. To that group Paul said even if you can move mountains with your faith, without love, it's worthless. .Then in verses, 4-7, Paul made a list of what love is not. “Love is not envious and boastful,” which was sent to the factions in the church that were fighting over who followed the better teacher. “Love is not puffed up” (which some of our bibles translate “arrogant”) was addressing the theologians in the church who were exhibiting a superior attitude towards the less biblically literate people of the church. “love does not *act shamefully*” was addressing an incestuous relationship in the church. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth”, was admonishing the members of the church who were taking each other to court.

There were a lot of issues in the Corinthian church. In every church there will always be people with different abilities and gifts, but love asks us to remember that there isn't

any part of the human body that can say to another, "I don't need you." Love asks us to remember that each of us and all of us are members of Christ's body because of grace alone. Love asks us to be accountable to AND, supportive of, each other.

Love is a reality check for the way I live my life as a follower of Jesus. If I can't honestly say, "I am doing this out of love for another person, or for the love of God, then Paul would say that it isn't worth the effort. When love isn't the motive behind my devotion to God, that's when religion becomes toxic - and completely out of touch with God's will and God's character - because *God is love*.

Prayer: *O God, in all our prayers and concerns and worries, we need the security of knowing Your love for us . Help us as we continue our journey through this transition., and may all that we say and do O Lord proceed from love. Amen*

Saturday November 12<sup>th</sup>, Read Matt. 13: 18-23

*"The one who hears and understands the word, bears fruit  
and yields 100, 60 and 30 fold"*

The *major* insight regarding this parable is, Jesus is *not* saying that these kinds of soil are permanent categories that are irreversible. The truth is, the different soils describe the way our Christian life and faith can be, depending on the circumstances.

The first "soil" about not understanding the word, is about when bad times, bad behavior or bad choices compromise our ability to live our faith. It's about the times when, because we're not understanding what God is truly like and what God is truly after, we get derailed . When that happens we more easily make wrong turns from God's ways.

Next there is the rocky ground . It sounds like it's about being a new believer and falling short when my Christian witness was tested. During the beginning stages of the Christian journey that surely happens. But because this is not an irreversible condition, the rocky soils represents the fact that there are areas of our lives where God isn't finished with us yet. It's about the fact that the spiritual life requires time and dedication to develop deep roots

The thorns represent all the worldly pressures we have to deal with - like bills and work and family obligations and sickness It can be so easy for those legitimate concerns to crowd out the effect the word of God can produce in our hearts. But if we keep trying to make prayer and faith practices an ongoing pursuit, they will produce a transforming effect in our hearts and lives.

There's one more thing that's very good news for us. In Jesus' day, farmers didn't sow their seeds like we do today. They just scattered them everywhere - so that they inevitably landed on all the kinds of soil Jesus spoke about. Jesus said that God is like an extravagant Farmer who will just keep sowing the seeds of His word in me and you, until they take root.

This parable is about the way God decides to invest in us – invites us to become His disciples , and then risks trusting us to accomplish His work in the world.

*Prayer: Lord Jesus in all that we say and do, help us to live into the trust and confidence You have in us. Thank You for believing so fully in us and our potential. Amen.*