

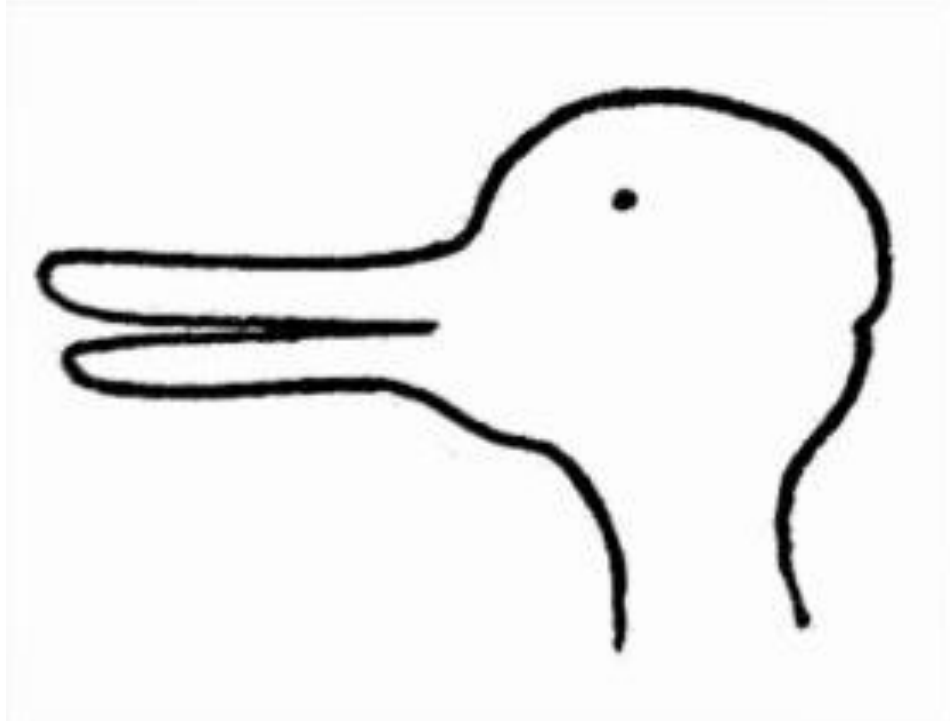
Philippians: Higher View
Sermon 11-11-18
Pastor Curtis Dehmey

Philippians 4:2–9

²I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.³Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, 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. ⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Message:

I have one simple question for you to start today, “What animal is this?”



(The audience gave their feedback. We took a vote. Ultimately, the Duck voters out-voted the Rabbit voters) Folks, we have a conflict on our hands. We can't seem to agree whether this is a rabbit or a duck. So what do we do with this disagreement? Some of us will say that if we just keep discussing, eventually, we'll come to consensus in one opinion or the other. And then some of you will want to beat your heads against a wall because this will take FOREVER to resolve. You'll only concede when your tired and hungry. Others of you will say, well let's just decide what it is by majority vote. If that were the case the (Winner) would have it. We would have to all accept that this is indeed a (winner). That leaves us with winners and losers. Some of us are right and some of us are wrong. That's maybe how some of you felt after the election this past Tuesday. Your side won some and the other side lost some. But, truly, does that really solve the issue of whether this is a duck or rabbit? If someone were to come along and see this image and say this is a (loser) would you quickly correct them because the majority said this was a (winner)? Believe it or not, we're not the first ones in the world to have a conflict. What does Paul think we should do when we encounter conflict? Especially in the church?

In our passage today, it starts out with a conflict among Euodia and Syntyche. “²I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.” In this first sentence, it's apparent that there is a conflict between these two women. And Paul urges them, “...to be of the same mind in the Lord.” What does that mean? Paul outlines that a little more in the following verses that we'll get to in just a minute. Now, nothing leads us to believe that this was a major conflict in Philippi. Paul doesn't spend a lot of time in his writing talking about this conflict. For all we know, this could have been a small squabble over what food to serve the people. Or maybe whether a drawing was a duck or a rabbit. Some of us will say, just exercise compassion and understanding for the different perspective. Don't make a big fuss about it, but try to understand where the “Duck” people are coming from or where the “Rabbit” people are coming from. This is a good practice of compassion. In fact, I learned at a young age, thanks to my older sister, to see things from the other persons point-of-view. This builds a compassionate and understanding heart even when you don't agree. Like I said, this is a good practice, but it doesn't exactly resolve the issue. Others, especially in the middle of a heavier conflict in the Church of the Brethren, will say, “this is a time to practice forbearance and tolerance.” Some of you who are attending the Compelling Vision meeting with me this afternoon may experience some of this rhetoric. “If we just practice forbearance and tolerance, then we'll all get along.” But even then, we may be able to be understanding and compassionate towards the others perspective, but it doesn't exactly resolve the conflict. It doesn't mean that

we agree. It just pushes it aside until someone gets upset again over the disagreement and brings all the crap back up.

So how do we resolve the conflict? Paul does a very Matthew 18 thing in the next sentence. If you remember from Matthew 18, Jesus says, “¹⁵If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church...” And this is what Paul says in our passage, “³Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, 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 essentially saying, “Please, my Philippian co-workers, the Philippian Church, come along side these women and help them resolve their conflict.” Paul is especially appealing to Clement to be the mediator here between these two women. If that doesn’t work, bring the issue before the whole Philippian church. Sometimes the conflict is relatively small and all it takes is for someone who has an unbiased view, who doesn’t have anything at stake, to come in and mediate the conflict. Maybe even just to help the Duck people and the Rabbit people to walk away in such a way in peace knowing that they are going to agree to disagree. The Duck-Rabbit argument isn’t that big of a deal, so why get upset with each other over it?

But then, there are much deeper conflicts. Conflicts that are deeply embedded in personal wounds. Conflicts that are entrenched in a certain way that we view the world. Conflicts that are deeply rooted in our upbringing and culture. How do we resolve those? I wish I had an exact formula for you to follow. I wish I could tell you that if you just do these things, everything will be alright. Sorry to disappoint you, but I can’t tell you what EXACTLY to do. Conflicts are not scientific, but how we handle conflict is more of an art. Especially, when we can’t just walk away agreeing to disagree. It’s a movement of the Spirit. It’s a movement of faith. Paul gives us some key markers. Some key ways of acting and being in the midst of conflict. In verse 4, he says, “⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” We know this verse. It’s something that’s on bulletin boards and it’s on crafty-like items in our households. But if you read this passage from verse 3 to verse 4, it feels a bit abrupt. One minute, Paul is talking about this conflict between Euodia and Syntyche and then the next minute he’s talking about rejoicing in the Lord? “Did I miss the transition?” You may be saying. No, you didn’t. Paul seems to indicate to us that sometimes resolving conflict isn’t a matter of arguing until we’re blue in the face. It’s by having the “same mind in the Lord.” What does that mean? It means having behaviors/practices or attitudes that reflect the nature of Christ. It means having

intimacy with the Lord. Biblical scholar Morna Hooker, says it really well, “If Christ behaved like that, how must those who are ‘in Christ’ behave? Put like that, it is clear what Euodia and Syntyche should do! If they do not do it, then they are in effect denying that they are ‘in Christ,’ denying that the way of Christ has been affirmed by God as God’s way. Could we, perhaps, try more often to go back to first principles in attempting to sort out the problems that inevitably arise between members of the Christian community? Should we, perhaps, worry less about who is right and who is wrong and ask instead, ‘what does it mean for us, as a community, to have the mind of Christ?’” If we have the mind of Christ, how would Christ call us to behave? What kind of attitude must we have?

What Paul does is he takes us out of the conflict and shifts our focus to the Lord. Why? Because in the heat of conflict we can’t really see clearly. We’re too emotionally wrapped up in it. We can’t help it. When we’re at odds with someone or a group of people, we are compromised. We can’t think clearly and rationally. We can’t think objectively. So, in that sense, we can’t mediate our own conflict. But there is one who can ultimately mediate, the Lord. Not to be too prescriptive, but what are the markers of someone who has the same mind as the Lord? It starts in verse 4 with the attitude TOWARDS the Lord, “⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” In other words, give thanks for all the ways the Lord has blessed you. Recognize and recall all the ways God has worked in your life. This sounds simple, but it’s far from easy. As many of you exemplified in your testimonies, it was hard for you to recall all the wonderful ways God has worked in your life. This is hard. In fact, I’ll admit, as I was spiritually preparing for this sermon, in my prayer time, I was griping to the Lord. Now, it’s okay to share our concerns and gripe to the Lord. He can handle it. God wants us to share those things with Him. But I caught myself as I recalled this passage. In that particular prayer, I had not said a word of thanks and counted my blessings until I caught myself. It’s easy to gripe and complain. To note all the ways things are going wrong in our lives. It’s hard to rejoice and give thanks in the Lord. When we give thanks to the Lord, our disposition changes. Our attitude changes. We move from pride to humility. We move from entitlement to undeserving. We move from control to surrender. We move from skepticism to trust. If our prayer life or, in general, our time with the Lord begins with joy and thanks, it starts to permeate in the rest of our life. This is why Paul says in the next verse, “⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.” If you’re disgruntled, prideful, self-righteous, entitled or controlling, you usually don’t have a demeanor of gentleness towards others. And he states that the “Lord is near” because when you practice a life of thanks and joy, you actively and intentionally choose to have this attitude, you automatically treat people with gentleness and because of that constant choosing of thanks and joy in the Lord, the Lord is near. Can we actually

experience the joy of the Gospel without living it? Without living out the joy of our faith in Christ? You know, the joy of having Christ as our savior? If you've forgotten what that feels like, recall when you made a conscious decision to follow the Lord? Do you remember that joy in the Lord? Do you still feel it today? Do you still actively choose that thanks and joy today?

See, because you choose joy and thanks in the middle of hardship, or in the middle of conflict, a ripple effect starts to happen. Not only have you begun to experience intimacy in the Lord, but other things change in your life as well. “⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Because you choose joy, thanks and intimacy with the Lord, the worries of your life start to fade away. “Supplication” is a humble and genuine request before God. By rejoicing and giving thanks, you take the posture of humility and then the requests you make to God are earnest rather than selfish or entitled. And guess what happens next, “⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Have you ever experienced the peace of God? If you have, you understand that it is a sweet and awesome thing. The best decisions I've made in my life happened because I had peace in the Lord. This is the reward or the end result of faithfully following God. Of having the “same mind” in Christ. I can't necessarily rationalize it, but I can testify to its results. God's peace is truly beyond our understanding. I can't explain it any further than that. You just have to experience it. If Euodia and Syntyche are able to rejoice and give thanks in the Lord, if they are willing to humbly lay their concerns and conflict before God, let go of their worries, they will experience the peace of the Lord. They will have the same mind in Christ. They essentially are letting the Lord figure out the disagreement and conflict. Now, that might sound Pollyanna. The skeptics among us may be saying, “Yeah right...like that's gonna happen.” I dare you. I dare you to try to follow these markers that Paul has laid out here in Philippians 4. I even double-dog dare you as Schwartz would say in the movie “A Christmas Story.” See what happens. Observe especially what transforms or changes in you.

Now, Paul is a smart guy. He knows the human tendency. He knows that after following these markers and feeling the peace of God that surpasses all understanding, that we have a tendency to return. As it says in Proverbs 26:11, “As a dog returns to its vomit, so fools repeat their folly.” So essentially, even after we perform all these markers and gain the peace of God, we have a bad tendency to go backwards. To go back to what started us down this conflictual path. We go back to re-hash the same argument with the other again. Or we go back to the thing that unsettled our spirit in the first place. And this is how Paul teaches us to curb that temptation, “⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is

commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” To avoid re-hashing the same thing all over again. To keep from playing that bad track over and over again, Paul calls us to meditate on these things. The things that are praise worthy. To focus on the positive things that are more important and more worthy of our time and attention. He’s not calling for merely positive thinking here and ignore the real issues. What Paul is calling us to do and to continue to do is to have a higher view. To look at the issues and the conflict with a God-like perspective. If you were God in heaven looking upon this conflict among His people, how would you feel? What would you want your people to do? Now some of us might say, well God would settle the dispute by telling them who is right and who is wrong. Maybe. What if both are wrong? That doesn’t sit very well with those of us who may be self-righteous. God is the only one who’s right. Like Paul, I think God would change the focus. First, Jesus would do as Paul illustrates in Philippians. Jesus says in Matthew 11, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Again, can we surrender our conflicts and issues to the Lord? Let Him figure it out. Be of the same mind in Christ. Listen for God’s voice. And, by the way, God’s voice often comes in whispers so that we have to listen carefully. God doesn’t usually speak loudly. Because we’re able to participate in this surrender, we have peace, we listen carefully on His voice and we focus on all the positive things God is doing, God’s kingdom comes among us. And what does Paul say in the last sentence, “⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.” God’s peace will remain in our lives as long as we keep our eyes fixed on Him and we don’t get distracted by all the other things around us.

We don’t know what happened with Euodia and Syntyche. Paul doesn’t indicate as much. But this is what I imagine happened. If Clement was successful in relaying Paul’s thoughts and words, Euodia and Syntyche started to pray with Clement. They started to give thanks for each other and rejoice what a blessing God has been in their lives. They earnestly and humbly surrendered their perspective to God and asked for guidance. And as they did so, they felt an emotional lift in their spirit. Like a burden had been lifted off their shoulders. Anger, despair, pride and rightness just all vanished away in an instant. They started to see God’s perspective. And when they saw God’s view, they let go even more of their conflict. They saw the wider view, the bigger view, the Kingdom view. Maybe they were able to resolve their initial conflict. Maybe not. But, in a sense, it didn’t matter. Because God knows what He’s doing. And the only way they were able to move forward is because they trusted Him.

Letting go of conflict or even working through conflict, it comes down to something very basic in the Lord. Do you trust the Lord? Do you trust Jesus? Do you trust that He knows what He's doing? Do you trust that He has your best interest at heart? Even if you don't understand it? Sometimes we can't work out conflict on our own, as hard as we try. Sometimes there isn't space for compromise. But I believe part of the heavenly call of God is to keep our eyes fixed on Him and He will make our paths straight. To bring this a little closer to home, honestly, I don't know what's going to happen to the Church of the Brethren over the next few years. I can tell you from attending Annual Conference and District Conference, it doesn't look good. I don't tell you that to discourage you, but just to be honest and forthright. I'm not sure we will ever be able to heal the fractures, wounds and divisions that remain in our denomination. But what I can tell you, is that our God is faithful. Whether the denomination continues or not is of little consequence in the grand scheme of things. If we're looking at things from God's point-of-view, the Kingdom of God will live on with-or-without the Church of the Brethren. Our faith is not in Providence Church. Our faith is not in a denomination called the Church of the Brethren. Our faith and our trust is in Jesus Christ. It's in the one who has the grandest perspective of all. So let's trust and focus on the one who can see all. Let's trust the work of God. And if we do that, I can guarantee you, you will experience "...the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding..." Amen.