

A Spirit of Cooperation

Philippians 4:1-9

Just what is required of followers of Jesus? One hears a similar complaint from some observant Jews today: this "love-stuff" is all well and good, but what difference does becoming a follower of Jesus make to one's daily life? We must begin with being rather than doing.

A follower familiar with the Gospels would, of course, readily cite Matthew 25, the charter of the Christian life, yet Paul is even more specific: "help these women, [Euodia and Syntyche], 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" (v. 3). So followers of Jesus are to assist one another "in the gospel," that is, to encourage each other to follow in the footsteps of Jesus as outlined in Matthew 25.

A distinct path is indeed offered, though it is not prescribed. It will unfold before those who take the initial steps indicated to help others negotiate the travails of ordinary life. Beginning with knowing one another by name, each calls the other forth to a shared life in Jesus, where attempting to live "in Jesus" evokes an immense gratitude for the community that results in rejoicing: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice! Let all know your "gentleness."

Benedict, whose Rule spelled out some implications of "living in Jesus" in greater detail, speaks often of gentleness, as would spouses who have been together for decades. "Living in Jesus" means living together with others, and persons living together can easily grate on each other.

Peter counsels those of us engaged in the communal task of following Jesus: "like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 2:5). So the ongoing task of building this community of followers of Jesus takes on the proportions of building the temple itself, comparing the stone edifice with a human construction in which "living stones" grate on one another as stones would were they brought together to make a single building. People busy in a common quest will inevitably shove and elbow one another, often using their sharp edges to find space for themselves. Like Peter, Paul suggests that this very elbowing can lead us toward shared prayer in "the Lord [who] is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (v. 5-6).

However, such a spirit of cooperation will emerge only as we develop that crucial "gentleness" toward one another. Surely this is more than "love-stuff." In fact, it describes the daily grind of living together, which Peter elevates to the constructive communal task of rebuilding the temple of God in Jerusalem, always considered by the people of the covenant to be the "dwelling place of God with us."

Although that building had recently been destroyed by Rome, the occupying power, this Philippian faith community was called to offer a counter-witness to the destructive powers that surround it; the very powers that put Jesus to death; by living out "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding" (v. 7). The key to attaining that peace is mutual gentleness and its exercise "guard[s] your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (v. 7). Paul finishes his exhortation with: "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" (v. 8).

Continuing his teaching, Paul calls those who follow Jesus' example to follow his as well: "Keep 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" (v. 9). "The God of peace" is the presence of Jesus among us, partaking in those very troubles that demand we be gentle toward one another. So we are members of the respectful, supportive and supportive family, recalling how the Jesus we follow was born into and emerged from a family, to offer a humble yet unerring path to the entire human family. As Jesus, Mary and Joseph and the other children assisted one another in the commonest of human tasks, Paul encourages us to help one another as we follow Jesus. What followers of Jesus consistently enjoy is the gift of following one another along the path he offers. That has of course been the witness of holy women and men throughout the history of this community, as those who are gentle toward one another also call each other forth to live faithfully to the call of the "God of peace," who is ever living in our midst, recognizable in our fellow travelers. **David B. Burrell**

Paul writes from prison to the church at Philippi. Waiting, even longing, to be with this beloved community, Paul is well into long, difficult days between his last visit to Philippi and when he will again feast with his friends there. The Philippian church, like Paul, is also suffering. The joy that energized the community when Paul first proclaimed the gospel in their midst is waning, partly because of his prolonged absence.

As sometimes happens during uncertain times, tensions had surfaced within the community. Paul wrote this urgent dispatch to Euodia and Syntyche, church co leaders who seem to be at odds with one another or

perhaps even with him: "Be of the same mind in the Lord" (v. 2). Both women have "struggled beside" Paul "in the work of the Gospel" (v. 3). Paul commends that work and counsels them and the rest of the community: "Keep 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" (v. 9).

Keep on with your everyday works of gentleness and prayerful living, Paul counsels the Philippians (v. 4). Bake a loaf of bread for the woman down the street whose husband just died, Paul might say to contemporary believers. Take a bag of groceries to the food closet. Visit a church member in the nursing home. Seemingly ordinary acts bear extraordinary gifts of God's love. Gospel acts of caring, teaches our communities about the persistent, everyday powerful, promises of God's grace in Christ. When faced with life's difficulties or wearied by life's seeming triviality, believers can count on God's nearness to us in Christ. This is the source of our joy.

Our lives, as Paul told the Philippians should be lives that radiate "gentleness" (v. 5) and nonanxious prayerfulness (v. 6). We are a people whose thoughts should overflow with "whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, [and] whatever is commendable" (v. 8). We are a people who, because of God's nearness, should rejoice always. **Jill Y. Crainshaw**

There is a warning here against gossip and tearing each other down, when our natural inclination is to make harsh judgment on one another, as the least demanding way to exalt ourselves! We sometime act like denigrating others can lift us above them without our having to undertake anything ourselves. **David B. Burrell**

Last Sunday, seven of our congregation participated in the Flint area CROP walk to fight hunger, locally and around the world. The represented

everyone who pledged and encouraged, in fact the entire congregation. Linda Holloway was one of the walkers and she began by informing us that she would only do the one mile walk. However, rather than taking the short course, she walked with the group on the longer course. I am convinced that it was the encouragement of each of us that made the difference. I was inspired by her perseverance. We shared a spirit of cooperation – different ones in the lead at different times – but all making the journey – all doing their part with joy!

So we can respond to the challenge of our observant Jewish brothers and sisters by reminding them and ourselves that the work of followers of Jesus is ever present and "never done." It is that of building a community of people who can sustain one another in the journey of faith, reminding each other of its goal, but even more of the joys attending the journey itself, no matter how arduous. **David B. Burrell**

There is a short You Tube video that teaches a great deal about the spirit of cooperation. It is called "Where is Matt 2012." In it Matt dances with people around the world. Sometimes he is the teacher and other times he is the learner; sometimes the group is large and sometimes it is small; sometimes he is in a foreign land and at other times he is in a U.S. city – however, all the time the dancers who joy and a spirit of cooperation. The world is looking at us for such an example. May they find us faithful!

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