**Philippians 2:1-18**

**September 27, 2020 (Heart Issues are Hard Issues: Whom Shall I Love and Whom Shall I Fear?**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for this morning comes from our Epistle lesson, Philippians 2 here re-reading these words. “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” This is our text

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

 We begin a sermon series today, which will run for the next 3 weeks that was put out by the Michigan District of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod titled, “Heart Issues are Hard Issues, a sermon series on racial healing in the church and for the community.” Pastors in our district have put together sermons that address racial tensions in light of the upcoming Epistle lessons in the 3-year lectionary series. The first sermon we are looking at this morning was written by Reverend Brian Dupre on our Epistle lesson for today, the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost from Philippians 2.

 We live in a time of fear and hatred of one another. Events even these past few days have sparked riots and problems in large cities all around our country. It feels like especially these past few months that tension never seems to ease or relax. What is at the heart of it? What do people want to see happen? We all want answers, which means an open dialogue, to communicate with each other in peace and compassion. Paul writes here in Philippians 2, “In humility count others more significant than yourselves.” In fear and hatred of one another is not the way God intended His creation, people of all race, creed, and color to behave or to treat each other. This text from Philippians chapter 2 clearly shows us that God wants ALL His people to be united in Christ, not divided by Satan. The entire text can be summed up by the second greatest commandment, to love our neighbor as ourselves. Who is my neighbor? Everyone who is not me. Who is your neighbor? Everyone who is not you. We are to love everyone who is not ourselves as we love ourselves.

 Yet that is the very thing we find hardest to do. Why? Because we have passed and continue to pass judgment on each other by the way we look, walk, speak, think, and even the clothes we wear, just to name a few. We have deemed some people as not worthy of our love. We hold ourselves up as the “ideal” of what a person should be and therefore if you aren’t just like us, you are less important, maybe even insignificant. Therefore, we don’t have to love you. This has caused people to treat others any way they wanted to, regardless of how evil it may have been. But love is not optional, it is a commandment.

 Arrogance, hatred, entitlement, impatience, self-reliance, self-gratification, self-importance, and selfishness are the tools and devices the devil uses against us to separate us, to tempt us to hate each other and draw us away from our faith in and love for Christ. But these things can only happen if we let them. The question for all God’s people is: whom do we love and whom do we fear?

 Pastor Dupre recalls a time last month when he met a man outside a store in Ann Arbor. While he waited for his turn, he struck up a conversation, and it quickly turned to the church. Although this man was white and Pastor Dupre is black, they found they had a lot of things in common. While they were talking Pastor Dupre thought that this was a great opportunity to invite him to come to church. Sadly, even though they had a lot in common, the man declined the invitation. His reason was he was told recently by a black pastor that white people are not allowed in black churches in order to maintain their identities as black churches. Pastor Dupre took that as an opportunity to explain without any confusion that there is no such thing as a black church nor a white church. There is only the Christian church, to which everyone is welcome.

 Whom shall everyone love? Hear the words from Matthew 22, “And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

 Whom shall everyone fear? Hear the words from Matthew chapter 10, ““And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Here God clearly tells us to love Him above all things and to love everyone else only second to Himself. He also tells us to fear Him only. Nothing and no one else can destroy both soul and body.

 Knowing this, we, as followers of Christ, should examine ourselves asking, “Whom do WE love and whom do WE fear?” Unfortunately, the answer to whom do we love is too often those who are just like us. And the answer to whom do we fear is everyone who is not just like us.

 So the truth is that those who do not love Christ, do not know or understand Christ. And in the same way those who do not love people different from themselves, do not know or understand, people different from themselves. Therefore, there can be no love without knowledge or understanding.

 If we are to ever have true unity within the Church, we are going to have to truly believe this: that which unites us is infinitely greater than that which divides us; meaning our love for and faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. If we are ever going to have peace, love, and understanding between people who are different based on a multitude of different things, the first thing we have to grasp is “it’s not about me.” It’s about Christ, and what we can do to help our brothers and sisters we share the earth with. Feelings of superiority and inferiority are Satan’s way of keeping us separated, infuriated, and uneducated about our the differences that we have with other people.

 Just as conceit breeds entitlement, jealousy breeds contempt. Satan would like nothing more than to keep people divided and at odds with each other. As long as we are at each other’s throats, there is no chance for reconciliation and little chance for light of love to shine. But God has not forsaken us. He has given us His Word to study and contemplate. He has given us prayer. He has granted us forgiveness. He has given us His Holy Spirit for comfort, strength, and guidance.

 But we have to face the sad reality that some people don’t want the unity Christ desires for us and His church on earth. Some of us have hardened our hearts so much that we may not even love ourselves. 1 John 3:15 warns us, “Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.” Some of us have had a warm heart for others that has grown cold.

 We come to God’s house to seek forgiveness. We come to God’s house to pray for our world. We come to God’s house to find the answers that plague was from a world that highlights problems but offers no solutions. We come to God’s house for encouragement and to give thanks that God has brought together many of us who do know and love Him to teach, preach, pray, and give praise. We come to God’s house and are equipped to share the Good News of our resurrected Lord with all we come in contact with. And to teach that everyone we come in contact with is our neighbor. The fruits of our faith are the good works we do to create unity within the church and among the people. We do not glorify ourselves but thank God for creating burning desires in us to serve. Together, we will serve until His will is fulfilled. And a cold heart is kindled by the Fire of the Holy Spirit.

 You see, God will restore unity to His church; the same type of unity enjoyed by the apostles and first Christians, being of one mind and of one accord, and having love, sympathy, compassion and affection for all, knowing that God desires none to perish. I encourage you to remain faithfully committed to serving the Lord in whatever capacity he has charged you. Do not lose hope because it appears evil is winning. Remember, Jesus has already conquered sin, Satan, death, and hell. Do not be deceived by the devil’s tricks beheld by your eyes.

 So perhaps you’ve been thinking, as you go throughout your life, as you look to the Scriptures for guidance, “Whom shall I love?” the answer is simple, and applies to all people—the Lord God, and my neighbor. And in the same way, if you ask “Whom shall I fear?” the answer is —the Lord God only. God’s love transforms the sinful heart to no longer hate, but to love, and to put others needs before your own, despite the differences. God’s love is always our focus, no matter how crazy the world may seem around us. God’s love is our hope and peace. May that love continue in your life as we meditate upon the struggles of our world not in despair, but in hope.

Amen

The peace of God which transcends all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.