**Philippians 4:4-13 October 11, 2020**

**Heart Issues are Hard Issues Sermon 3: We Are One in Christ**

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

This is the 3rd and final sermon we will be meditating upon from the Heart Issues are Hard Issues: A Sermon Series on Racial healing in the Church and for the Community, a sermon series that was produced by pastors in the Michigan District and it’s use was encouraged in all the congregations of the Michigan District throughout these past few weeks. This particular sermon is titled, “We Are One in Christ”, it’s text is Philippians 4:4-13, our Epistle lesson for today, and was written by Pastor Gabriel Kasper.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The last verse of our Epistle lesson for today has to be one of the most misinterpreted Bible passages of all time. It can almost feel like it’s just a green light to being exceptional at anything here on Earth thanks to God. Paul writes, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

When Pastor Kasper was a young boy he had a poster in his room. I myself can remember seeing the same poster when I attended school at St. Paul’s Lutheran Church in Millington, Michigan. On this poster was a picture of a cartoon boy who was wearing and holding a ton of sports gear. He had both a football and bicycle helmet on, hockey pads, roller skates, cleats, he was holding a baseball bat and basketball in one hand and trapping a soccer ball underneath his right foot, and somehow he was able to hold onto a tennis racquet and golf club at the same time. And at the bottom of this poster it quoted this same verse from our Epistle lesson “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

The implication of course being that this cartoon boy can play every sport imaginable through Christ who strengthens him. And while that is an encouraging and motivating thought based on the words of Holy Scripture, that is not at all what this text is about!

So, what is this text about!? And in what ways does it fit into our current series on racial healing? Here is what we are going to see in our text: What we believe about ultimate reality shapes our community, conviction, and contentment. That will be our outline today. What we believe about ultimate reality shapes our 1) community, 2) conviction, and 3) contentment. And before we even get into unpacking that outline and that theme, it’s important we understand the context of the book of Philippians.

See, the book of Philippians is actually a letter written to the church in the ancient city of Philippi. And this letter is written by the Apostle Paul, a leader in the early church. Now, we know that Paul wrote many letters to many churches, we have many of those letters in our Bible. But an argument can be made that the letter to the Philippians is the most personal. And there’s a couple of reasons for that. First of all, this is a church that Paul started. You can read about it in Acts 16. Paul shows up to the city of Philippi and starts sharing the Gospel with folks. And the first person to receive the Gospel is a wealthy businesswoman named Lydia. And then, immediately after that, he casts a demon out of a slave girl, and then he and his companion Silas save the life of a suicidal Philippian jailer and end up baptizing his whole family. So, by the end of Acts 16, you’ve got a business woman, a slave girl, and a gentile jailer convert to Christianity. And just like that, you got a church.

Now, the start of the Philippian church is certainly amazing, but I want us to focus in on how unique this community is, and how unique it is that God would use Paul specifically to start this church. See, prior to his conversion to Christianity, Paul was a Pharisee, an elite group of Jewish leaders and scholars at this time in history. And every morning Pharisees had a prayer that they would pray that started like this, “God I thank you that you did not make me a woman, a slave, or a gentile…” Every morning Paul would pray, “God, I thank you that you did not make me a woman, a slave, or a gentile.” But what happens in Philippi?! God uses Paul to share the Gospel with a woman … a slave … and a gentile. That’s the start of this particular church.

Now, what causes Paul to shift from praying every day, “God, thank you that I’m not like these people,” to starting a church made up exclusively of “these people?!” Paul encounters the resurrected Jesus. Paul receives the Gospel. When that happens in his life, he can’t stay the same. When you encounter the resurrected Jesus, when you put your faith in Him, when you receive the Gospel, it fundamentally shifts how you view other people. It fundamentally shifts who’s allowed in your community. This is how what you believe about ultimate reality shapes your community.

To believe the Gospel means I believe that my fellowship with God has nothing to do with my moral performance, it has nothing to do with the culture I come from, it has nothing to do with my ethnicity or my race. But I get to enjoy fellowship with God, purely because of God’s grace poured out for me in Jesus Christ. Because I believe that’s true of ultimate reality, then I seek out fellowship with others not on the basis of their moral performance, not on the basis of their culture, not on the basis of their ethnicity or race, but I simply seek to extend the grace that God has given me and all people in Christ Jesus.

But it is our failure to live out the reality of the Gospel that contributes to racial division amongst people. Because if I don’t believe that I am made right with God purely by his grace in Christ, then I will inevitably seek my righteousness and acceptance in something else, often times in my race or ethnic identity.

As we think about the cries for racial justice in our society right now, we see two responses from Christians that fail to live into the community created by the Gospel. On the one hand, I hear some Christians get very defensive and deny the problem of racism in our society. And on the other hand, I hear folks who are speaking about the pervasiveness of racism in our society, but doing it in such a way that they shame and degrade their brothers and sisters in Christ.

But, this is not the way of the Gospel. The Gospel frees us to not get defensive, but instead to acknowledge, confront, and repent of the sin of racism in our own lives and in our society. And the Gospel frees us to do this in a spirit of love. The Gospel says that we are one in Christ. The Gospel says that God brought us into fellowship with Him by no merit of our own but purely by His grace in Christ.

And we’re meant to show that grace to one another and offer the world a vision of a new kind of community—one united by Christ. But we’re not just a community, we’re a community with convictions. Look with me at verse 10 in our text: “I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity.”

Now, what’s Paul talking about here? Well, the whole reason Paul is writing this letter is to thank the Philippians. Paul at this time is in a prison in Rome. And in the Roman prison system they didn’t really feed you or clothe you, so the only way you ate or had clothes was if people brought them and gave them to you. And these Philippian Christians did exactly that for Paul. They sent someone upwards of 1,200 miles from Philippi to Rome with a “prison care package” for Paul. This is what he’s referencing in verse 10 here. He’s saying, “Hey, I rejoiced that you showed your concern for me.” He’s saying, “I know you cared about me in spirit, but now that you’ve given me this gift to sustain me in prison, I know you truly care about me.”

Now, this begs a couple questions. Why would the Philippians take the incredible risk of sending one of their own on a long and most definitely dangerous journey in order to bring Paul supplies? And then secondly, why is Paul in prison in the first place? And the answer to both of these questions is the same … they believe the same ultimate reality, and that shapes their convictions. Both Paul and these Philippian Christians believe that the fundamental truth behind everything is that Jesus is Lord, and that shapes their convictions.

The whole reason Paul is in prison is because he’s viewed as an enemy of the state because he proclaims that Jesus is Lord instead of Caesar. And the whole reason the Philippians sent Paul this gift is because they believe that Jesus is Lord, and they want Paul to continue to share that message even in the face of adversity. They are convicted. And this adversity actually pushes them forward in their conviction.

Now, that may sound backwards, but let’s think about it for a second. Have you ever seen what a group of people who share the same convictions and beliefs do when one of their own faces adversity? They don’t back away but they actually get bolder in their convictions. Right?

On April 12, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested and put in jail for his civil rights protests in Birmingham. Did the Civil Rights Movement slow down when he was arrested? Did it stop? No. It was thrust forward. People were emboldened by Martin Luther King’s arrest. So much so that it led to the August 28, 1963 historic “March on Washington,” in which Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his famous speech called “I have a dream.” When people have shared convictions and beliefs, adversity doesn’t slow them down; it actually thrusts them forward. Brothers and Sisters, may we share that same conviction. The conviction that Jesus is Lord and that that actually means something!

Because what we believe about ultimate reality will shape our convictions. And so often I fear that you, me, the Church itself confesses Jesus as Lord with our mouths but fail to confess it with our lives. Instead of Jesus being Lord, we let our politics be Lord, our social media presence or friendships and relationships, and perhaps above all, our comfort be Lord. May we turn away from those idols and instead live in light of the reality that Jesus is Lord, and because of that seek to rectify the deep racial disparities in our society.

May the Lordship of Jesus enable us to pursue a church, a city, a country, and world in which ethnic and racial differences are celebrated as reflections of the image of God. Where the color of someone’s skin doesn’t determine their lot in life. May the lordship of Jesus enable us to seek to live into the reality that we are one in Christ with our brothers and sisters of all races. May we live with that conviction. And finally, may we live with contentment.

Look with me at verses 11–12 in our text. “Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.” Paul says he has learned the secret of contentment. Remember he’s writing this from a prison cell. He says, it doesn’t matter. I can be wealthy, I can be poor, I can be hungry, I can be full. Doesn’t matter. In any and every circumstance, I am content. No. Matter. What. Paul says, “I am content.” Can you say the same thing? Are you content? Always in a state of satisfaction? Or are you always yearning for more? More money, more toys, more time, more promotions, more acceptance, more relationships, more recognition, more status, more success, more love, more whatever, more, more, more. Is it ever enough? Are we ever at a perfectly balanced time in life? When we finally get that “one thing” we need to be satisfied, to be content, are we actually content? No. So, what’s the secret? How do we live in a state of satisfaction and contentment regardless of circumstance? Paul says he’s got the answer, verse 13: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” Paul can face anything, because Christ is strengthening him. Paul can be content in any circumstance because Christ is strengthening him. So the secret to finding true contentment is looking at where you are drawing your strength from. Paul says the secret to contentment is being strengthened by Christ. So, if you’re not content, you should ask, “Where am I drawing my strength from?” The temptation is for us to draw strength from ourselves, or from others, or from our circumstances. If I can be strong enough internally then I’ll be content. If I have the right people supporting me then I’ll be content. If things are going my way, then I’ll be content.

But, of course, we all know the reality is that none of us is strong enough internally all the time, people will let us down, and my goodness if 2020 has taught us anything, it’s that our circumstances are almost never ideal. So we have to draw our strength from something outside ourselves, our social circle, and our circumstances. We have to draw strength from Christ. Now, that sounds all well and good, but how does that actually work? It works when I recognize that the biggest problem in my life has already been solved. See, the biggest problem in my life, your life, and our world is that, left to our own devices, we are hopelessly lost in our sin. Turned in ourselves and turned away from the love of God.

But God in His grace sent Jesus to take on your sin and the sin of the world and nail it to the cross. And because of Jesus’ death and resurrection, you are forgiven, you are set free, you are welcomed into a restored relationship with the Father for now and all of eternity. When you see that the biggest problem in your life is already taken care of, you can draw strength from that reality, you can rest in that grace, and you can find contentment. And from that place of contentment in the Gospel, we can celebrate the reality that we are one in Christ.

May you look to Christ on the cross and see that in him you are united to brothers and sisters of all races, and may that lead you to live with conviction and contentment.

Amen

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

Amen.