

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

At our online Bible Study this past Thursday evening, we were discussing Paul's letter to the Philippians, particularly the portion we heard this morning. And a question came up which I think deserves to be shared and considered. The question was, is it ever right to 'compromise' when it comes to Christ? In other words, I think, is it ever right to dilute our steadfast belief in Christ's truth? Should we ever second-guess what Jesus taught, or what we believe to be true about those teachings? When we have made vows of commitment to the fundamental understandings and policies of our spiritual heritage, Is there any way that it could be faithful to engage in compromise? Dare we risk damaging our relationship with God in Christ by seeming to water-down our beliefs? It is a very good question. And it opens a very broad landscape of possible responses. And I thank the person who asked that question the other night, because I think it gives us some real meat to chew on, and an opportunity for deeper discussion.

We were considering the part of this letter where Paul asks his 'companion', the church there in Philippi, to help sort out what might have been a disagreement between two of the church's leaders, Euodia and Syntyche. We can't tell from the information in the letter whether there was really some kind of conflict between these two women, or whether it really had anything to do with the church's life of faith, but apparently Paul had heard that something was amiss, and decided to bring it up and offer his advice. He was writing this letter from prison, and couldn't just travel there to northern Greece to help sort out the problem, or investigate how deep it was, but he loved this little church he had founded some years before; he called it 'my joy and my crown'. Clearly, he was very proud of the people there; they brought him joy which he wore like a crown. But a crown also means responsibility, and any hint of a problem there in Philippi would have made him feel called to step in if he could. Maybe it was the real reason for writing this letter in the first place.

So, our conversation on Thursday turned toward what kind of compromises might be acceptable in dealing with controversies in local parishes. And I don't mean what color the new carpet should be or what the menu for a harvest dinner fundraiser should be, but rather more difficult questions about how we live out our faith together. Now, frankly, I am unaware of any serious faith controversies here at St. John's, except perhaps whether we should go back to normal Sunday services during this pandemic. That might be a question which impacts and informs our life together as faithful Christians, and it's a question with which our vestry is occupied at the moment. Should we make some sort of compromise? And, of course, we can turn to our diocese and our Bishop for guidance. But in Paul's day, there was not as yet any institutional church structure, and each local church had to make independent decisions, based on the guidance of various missionaries and their varying opinions.

We have no idea what, if any, controversies there were in Philippi, but it might have been something to do with money, for example. Should they send money to Paul, or over to Peter and James in Jerusalem to support their missionary work? Or should they keep the money they had raised from their fundraisers to build a better meeting-place? Or should they distribute it to the poor in their own city, establish a food pantry, start a scholarship for poor students to study rhetoric or even spend some to hire a pastor? And how much should each member be expected to contribute? Should they require a tithe? Should they charge a membership fee? Or perhaps their questions had more to do with ritual: Did one have to be baptized before coming to Sabbath services and receiving communion? What should be the wording of baptismal vows? Should everyone recite the Apostle's creed and swear that they believed it? From which scrolls should they read on the Lord's Day. Remember, there were no written gospels in those days, but even so, should gentile Greek Christians be expected to revere the old Hebrew Bible with its prophets and historical figures like David and Moses? Should all the men get circumcised? Should there be some sort of compromise?

When we read today's Old Testament lesson from the book of Exodus, it certainly doesn't sound like God is in a mood to compromise. God has, by grace, brought the Hebrews out of enslavement in Egypt, and

has enlisted Moses to guide them through this pilgrimage meant to teach them endurance and steadfastness for the purpose of salvation. Moses has been tasked with demonstrating to them the virtues and rewards of grace, and to bring them the fundamental teachings, the Commandments, which have been meant to enrich their lives. Meanwhile, though, by this time on their journey toward salvation, they have not yet matured enough that their hearts are really in it. They convince Aaron to make them an image of gold which they can worship and adore, and God is disappointed beyond belief! It takes Moses to remind God, in this curious conversation, to remember the long view, to be patient with the immature faith of the people, and to set aside the disaster God's temper would have liked to have visited upon them. It wasn't really that hard to convince God and to change God's mind; just the fulfillment of God's dream might take a little while longer, that's all.

But that's kind of the point here, isn't it? The fulfillment of God's dream, the coming of the kingdom, the realization of God's intent, are the long view. Like the Philippians, we are pilgrims on a mysterious journey. We walk a labyrinth whose goal is not unfamiliar, but yet follow the turns and corners of our path not knowing exactly what we'll experience with each new step. The goal is the kingdom of heaven. That is the long view. That is the big picture. That is the dream of grace which we believe in our hearts. But along this path we pray for enlightenment to guide and encourage us, the light of God's own anointed Christ, who is the embodiment of God's love among us. I dare say to you that God's love is absolute truth, and I hope and pray that you can experience it in your hearts. But the route we travel through the desert is, at least in my experience, a mysterious one, one which is often confusing, filled with questions which can change our minds and baffle our wits. Is each step really one which can be made with absolute confidence and certainty? It would be easy, wouldn't it, if we could treat life like plowing a field, keeping our gaze straight ahead to the goal at the other end of life's field, just pushing ahead through random rocks and unexpected depressions, never wavering from the intention or making compromise with reality. But, sadly, our lives don't seem to be like that. The goal at the end of our winding labyrinth may be just as certain, but the route is often yet to be determined.

Paul makes some suggestions to the church in Philippi, his companion and joy and crown. He suggests that they seek inspiration, and do it joyfully. He even repeats himself to make sure they get the message: rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice! For it is by living in the Lord, living in the Lord's mindset, living out the Lord's baffling questions and teachings, that they, and we, will experience the peace of God which, while it does indeed surpass all understanding, will *keep* our hearts and minds engaged. Joy in the Lord will keep our minds curious and our hearts inspired on this journey. Meanwhile, Paul says, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think on these things during your pilgrimage, and God will be with you. Jesus, you remember, sums up all the commandments and teachings into the big picture of loving God and each of your neighbors. Easier said than done, by the way; that's why he commends these two women who have struggled beside him, who have strived so hard to follow the gospel intent. That intent isn't as easy as you might think. Whatever the disagreement between these two might be, whatever different perspective or opinion they might hold, they have stuck together and endured for the long view, the coming of the kingdom, the fulfillment of God's dream, God's intention for our future.

So, the king throws a party to mark his son's wedding, a celebration of his new relationship, a festival of rejoicing in a fresh start for his kingdom. And everyone is invited. But some can't be bothered; they have other places to go and people to meet. They see no advantage in the long-range goals the king has for the community. Jesus makes them sound a little "stiff-necked". Fine, says the king; let them go their own way. But meanwhile, the invitation includes those who hadn't expected the privilege, and they are happy and quick to receive it. But there is this one thing: if you're just coming for the food and the dancing, forget it. Come for the long view of the big picture. And for heaven's sake put on a happy face, clothe yourself in joy for the celebration, look above and beyond our daily dogmatic differences, and raise your glass to toast the relationship of the Son with his earthly bride! Amen.