

## *The Joy of Working Out Our Differences*

### Philippians 4

Sunday, April 28, 2024

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By now many of you know that I grew up attending a country church in South Dakota: Roseni Lutheran. Roseni was painted white, had a tall steeple, with a loud bell, and was set on top of a hill. You could see it for miles. As a child, I viewed it as a sacred place. God lived there.

One day my two youngest siblings, Tim and Joe, said they had a surprise for me – at the church. Did I want to come and see it? *Sure, who doesn't like a good surprise?* We were preacher's kids – PKs – so we had no trouble getting in. My brothers turned on the lights. They had big smiles on their faces. Obviously, they were delighted about something.

We walked into the sanctuary. Would you believe that my two little brothers had run a bright orange Hot Wheels track all the way from the balcony, down to the altar in front? I stood there in disbelief, not really knowing what to say. Quick as could be, my brothers scampered up to the balcony and began releasing their Hot Wheels cars, which careened down the track and toward the altar. They did it again and again. And they did it with absolute glee.

Meanwhile, being a responsible, older brother, I warned them that this might not be the most holy thing to do in God's house. I warned them that they better think about taking it down before some of the tried-and-true saints of the church got wind of what they were doing. And finally, I warned them that they better check the sky before heading home, because Almighty God might just decide to strike them dead with a bolt of lightning.

Fortunately, the Hot Wheels track did come down long before Sunday. The tried-and-true saints did not find out, at least not that I know. And my two little brothers lived to see another day. So, what do you think, did my little brothers do something wrong? Was it sacrilegious? Did they somehow offend God – after all, this was God's house? And if God wasn't offended, what if some of the regulars at church had been offended? No doubt, that would have put a damper on my brothers' glee!

We're finishing up Philippians this week. Like a lot of passages in the book, the one for today is messy too. As you know, the Apostle Paul started several

congregations in the early days of Christianity. None of those congregations looked like Roseni Lutheran Church. No, they were small house churches. Each had to figure out how to be a church together. I'm sure it was especially hard when Paul packed up and left to start a new church elsewhere.

After he was gone, Paul received regular reports through his associates. Timothy is the associate mentioned in Philippians. In response to the reports, Paul would write letters of encouragement and teaching, always more teaching.

It's not hard to see why problems arose. The churches were filled with recent converts. They were often in the dark about how to live faithfully. In other words, were things like those Hot Wheels tracks sacrilegious or not? Paul's letters helped new Christians wrestle with all sorts of questions.

One of the major concerns for both Jews and Gentiles was locating the Sacred One. In Paul's brave, new world, God was not in a temple, but in the gathering of God's people. That's where the Spirit of God was, not primarily in a building, but wherever God's people happened to be.

Paul often referred to Jesus' followers as the body of Christ. He pictured them as a family, living as brothers and sisters. No doubt, as a family they were bound to have their share of squabbles, different ways of understanding God's workings in the world. In times of change, some were tempted to go back to old and familiar ways, while others were open to exploring new and different possibilities.

As you might imagine, some of those new possibilities got taken too far. People got offended. Feelings got hurt. The Hot Wheels cars came crashing down near the altar. And if you listened closely, you could probably hear someone like my father shaking his head and saying, "Help, help! The nerve of some people's kids!"

So, if the early Christians were encountering Christ primarily in their relationships with each other, what did that mean? Like any relationship, I suppose, those in the church needed to connect with each other, to help each other, to love each other, and if there were problems, to do their best to work them out. When they did those things, they were the body of Christ together.

Friends, aren't those things true for us, as well? Don't we see them week after week here at Good Shepherd? A few that I saw this past week: people at

Shepherd's Inn celebrated as Jean and Arnie Carlson were back together again after 9 long weeks apart; Sandy Schroeder stopped by the church with a memorial gift, remembering the one-year anniversary of her husband, Tom's, death; and parents, grandparents, and mentors gathered to celebrate the artwork of our confirmation students as they told stories and shared Bible verses that inspired them.

Moments like these are sacred moments. We are encountering Christ together. The church isn't simply a building. It's the gathering of God's people. It's the body of Christ at its best.

In our Philippians passage for today, Paul responds to a couple of pressing concerns from those in Philippi. Notice that he tells the congregation to imitate him. At first, this seems a bit egotistical. Then again, the role of teacher and student was well-established in the ancient world. The two had a special bond. It was assumed that the lifestyle of a teacher could have a profound impact upon others. When those "others" were first-generation believers, with no New Testament to read, they needed all the help they could get.

Paul warns about some churchgoers whose lives are spiraling out of control: food and drink and pleasure have become their gods. They sound like *libertines*, who feel free to do just about anything they please. Perhaps their actions shouldn't surprise us. Paul has preached a gospel of freedom. He has said that believers are no longer bound by the 613 laws of the Old Testament. Evidently some have been taking their freedom to excess.

Paul chides them, "These are paths that can lead to destruction. Your minds are set on earthly things." He says, "Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul adds, "Jesus will someday transform our lowly bodies into bodies of glory."

Paul addresses a second concern as well. It might be the most important concern of the whole letter. Paul had gotten word of a simmering conflict. There are two women – Euodia and Syntyche – who are not getting along. We don't know what the problem is, but we do know that words can wound and feelings can easily get hurt. What's interesting is that these two women are described as partners with Paul, leaders in the church.

Maybe that's why Paul doesn't gloss over the problem. Instead, he calls the two women by name. Picture the moment. As the letter is read aloud during

worship, Euodia and Syntyche are probably as surprised as anyone. *Gulp!* They might have preferred to deal with the matter in private, but not Paul. The problem was evidently serious enough that it was splitting the church.

Now, friends, don't get nervous, we're not going to start naming names here at Good Shepherd. But what's noteworthy in Philippians is that Paul expects the congregation to deal with it. He doesn't take sides. He doesn't try to solve it for them. Yet he does express confidence that the church will act like brothers and sisters, they will imitate him in their relationships, and they will find a way to patch things up, and when necessary, to apologize and to forgive.

As Paul concludes his exhortation to the women – and to the entire church family – he seems determined to end on a positive note. That makes sense. There can be real joy in working out our differences: “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I will say, Rejoice.” Paul urges them: “Don't get stuck in your troubles. Be the body of Christ you are called to be. Work it out!”

Friends, what the letter to the Philippians says to me is that it's never been easy to be the church. Fifty-five years after my brothers' Hot Wheels adventure, I'll admit that I overreacted that day. I don't think my brothers were offending God. Deep down, I was more concerned about how their actions might offend others, and thus embarrass our family. But would it have been such a terrible thing for a couple of young boys to be playing at church?

Ever since the days of Paul, the church has been less a building and more a people, a people who find ways to connect and help and love and – yes – forgive each other. Whenever we get together as the body of Christ, there are opportunities for sacred moments. Will they all go exactly as planned? Of course not. But what we do has a sacred purpose: it's meant to build us up for the work Christ has given us to do.

As we come to the end of Philippians, Paul is still languishing in his prison cell, hoping and praying that he might be able to see his little house church one more time. While he waits, Paul shares a parting word: “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, 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. 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.” Amen.