

Title: “More than Family”

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Phil. 4:14

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Service Readings: Deut. 8:1-10; Phil 4:6-20; Luke 17:11-19

We are more than family; we are the body of our Lord and Savior. We share in each other's troubles; even find fellowship through them.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² 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. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me. ¹⁴ Yet it was kind of you to share^{me} my trouble.

“It was kind of you to share my trouble.” This is what Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians. Have you ever stopped to consider what he meant by these words? Might he have received a sympathy card while in prison, maybe signed by everyone in the congregation? Might he have learned that they prayed for him each time they met? Or maybe they sent messengers to him, letting him know that they were keeping him in their thoughts. What do you think? And what does it matter?

It matters because it relates directly to the tradition that we are preparing for this evening. Tomorrow we will gather with family, and maybe even very close friends. We will share with each other our lives, our experiences, our joys, and maybe even our frustrations and struggles. And we'll do this because we have a connection to them, in some way: it may be through heritage, marriage, or friendship, but it will be a connection nonetheless. What I mean to say is this: there will be no one in that gathered group that is a complete outsider; everyone will have a connection to someone else who is somehow connected to that group, to that congregation of people. A fiancé, for example, will be present because of the person he or she is engaged to.... you get the idea.

And so the point I am trying to make is simply this: the group that assembles together shares in some fundamental commonality; they all have some *things* in common. And so it makes sense that they are together.

So we can turn back to Paul and his time in prison when he wrote this letter to the congregation in Philippi. We can assume that he is not thanking them for a generic Hallmark card that wished him the best of luck while incarcerated. What connection did he have with these people? And maybe more revealing, what would cause them to *want* to share in his trouble? And even *more revealing*, what does it mean that they did, in fact, *share* in his trouble?

Now, before we answer that, let me add to this question. The ESV translates this Greek word as “shared” but other translations use the phrase “to take part in” or even “have fellowship with” as the English phrase. Is this translation difference significant? Probably not, but these alternatives do offer a different facet in which to view Paul’s letter. Consider these alternatives to his sentence that it was kind to share in his troubles: “It was kind of you to take part in my troubles,” or “it was kind of you to have fellowship in my troubles.” Either of these statements tend to more personalize his message to this congregation, don’t they? They seem to emphasize the fact that they were not sending cheap sympathy cards or empty promises of prayers. They were *sharing* in his troubles; they were finding *fellowship* in his troubles. And whatever those things mean, they mean more than superficial sentiments. And so our question tonight is this: what *does* Paul mean and how can we apply this to our own lives? And the key to this question is on connection: how do we view ourselves as connected to others, especially others who are in need?

This may be an easy question to answer tomorrow when you are surrounded by loved ones, or people who are connected to your loved ones, but this is not who Paul is speaking about. These are people that probably wouldn’t be counted among his attendees at any Thanksgiving feast because they are not his close family. These are a people who are gathered together because of someone else besides him. You see, the connection that he has to these people is... different. The world might call it *superficial*, but clearly he would disagree, for his letter is clearly passionate about the connection that exists between him and them. And so, if we reject any suggestion that the world might proffer and instead adopt Paul’s view, we are *still* left with this unanswered question: why would these people, who some might not even *know him* personally, want to share in his suffering?

A possible answer might be found in the account of Corrie ten Boom. She was a Christian who worked with her family to help many Jewish people escape from the Nazis during the Holocaust by hiding them in her home. Eventually her family was caught, arrested, and placed in a concentration camp. While detained, she organized prayer gatherings and readings from the Gospels. She was eventually released and continued to serve others in remarkable ways. Her story offers an answer to the question we asked about Paul and the congregation: why would people share in suffering of others, and what might it even mean to find *fellowship* in that suffering?

The first place that we can locate an answer is in the confinement of Corrie ten Boom. To those she served, she didn’t just meet them where they were at, she *joined them!* She *became* the prisoner that they had become and she shared in the very real sufferings of these people. She knew what it was like to feel hunger; she knew what it was like to feel fear; she knew what it was like to face death. And yet, through all of this she became a light to these people, she brought hope to these people who were also suffering. And they could look to her with confidence that she understood what they were going through because she was experiencing it herself. And so, they could *share* in her sufferings as well as in each other’s sufferings, or maybe a better phrase might be that they could find fellowship in their sufferings because they suffered together. So, even after the war, even after they were freed, when news reached the ears of the survivors that one of them was suffering, they *all* suffered.

So the account of Corrie ten Boom gives us an understanding of *how* people can share in, and find fellowship in the sufferings of others, but it still doesn’t answer the *why* for Paul and the church in Philippi. They didn’t have a shared experience like Corrie did, so what motivated them? The

answer, of course, is Jesus, and it is in two different ways that he is that answer we are searching for tonight.

First, Jesus entered into the world as a human. He experienced everything that any other person experienced at that time. He felt hunger; he felt fear. And he also felt the weight that sin had placed on the world. He understood his mission and it was to take upon himself all of that sin and bear the wrath and punishment for it. And he knew that this would subject him to excruciating physical and spiritual pain. And that he would have to give up his life in the process. And he did it, all of it, willingly and obediently.

So what this means is that, because he entered into his creation as man, and because he experienced all of this, we can have confidence when he says that he understands the pain that we are going through. We can trust that he really does “get it” because he experienced it here on earth. We have a fellowship with him through this shared suffering – both his and ours. And this fellowship exists not just between Jesus and us, but it also exists between us and each other. Just like Corrie ten Boom shared in the sufferings of those around her, even those who were not close to her, those who were in different concentration camps and who only learned about her *after* the war. Even *they* considered fellowship with her, just as they did with everyone else who similarly suffered. And this is what Paul means when speaking about this very topic. We all share in each other’s sufferings because we are all connected to Jesus. And because we are all connected to Jesus, we also share in his suffering. This becomes our common connection, our common experience, and it becomes the reason that we are motivated, and able to share in the experiences of each other.

But that’s just the first way that Jesus is the answer to this question. The second is similar, but much richer than the first, and it is this: In baptism, we are connected to Jesus in a very personal way. Not only do we share in his suffering, we also share in his death and resurrection. We dwell in Jesus and he dwells in us. The bible likes to say that Jesus is the head and we are the body, and this highlights the intimate connection that we have with him, as well as the intimate connection that we have with each other. Baptism is *how* we are able to share in the sufferings of Jesus, and is how we are able to share in the sufferings of other Christians, even if we do not personally know them. In baptism, we come into fellowship with each other, *through* Jesus.

And so, as you gaze around the table tomorrow evening, consider your fellowship with each one of them. Consider how you share in each other’s sufferings. It may not look anything like the shared suffering of Corrie ten Boom, but don’t dismiss it. Maybe it is the childhood that you and your siblings experienced. Or maybe it is just recognizing the emotional distress that a loved one is going through. Whatever it is, know that because of your connection with them through Jesus, you can share in their suffering: because you are part of the body of Christ you are able to share in their sufferings, just as Jesus shared in yours.

Please pray with me.

Gracious and merciful God, we thank You for the gift of Your Word, which You have spoken to us through Your servant Paul. We thank You for the example of the Philippians, who found fellowship in Paul’s troubles and supported him, even from a distance. Help us, O Lord, to follow their footsteps and to share in the lives of other Christians in our own families, our community, and the world.