

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

October 11, 2020

Exodus 32:1-14

Philippians 4:1-9

REJECTING, EMBRACING

In his [letter to the church at Philippi](#), the writer Paul admonishes the believers to guard their thinking. They are to "fill their minds and meditate on things true, noble...the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse" (Philippians 4:8-9/*The Message Version*). The church in this city was full of drama, and the people were up in arms about many internal matters. Even the church leaders were at odds with one another.

This in-house bickering, Paul alludes, was connected to how they viewed their circumstances, God, and yes, each other. Their thinking predetermined how they treated each other. These followers of Jesus spent so much time in peevish confrontations that their public wrangling was becoming embarrassing. It was also hindering the service of the church and the believers' spiritual growth. Their ill thinking led to discontent and anxiety. Relational aggression at work.

I am not so naïve as to believe that thinking about the ocean, a family gathering, the beauty of fall or a newborn baby will counteract the violence that seems to pervade our world's DNA. However, I do hold that if the abuser could think of the (potential) victim as someone's wife, husband or child, maybe there would not be the rush to harm, hurt or hit. We must learn to see each other beyond the moment. If we could just stop and think for a minute, then a lifetime of residual anguish or even death could be averted.

This is what intimacy requires. This is what it means to be domestic. Think about it. My little purple purse reminds me to think on these things.

[The Rev. Dr. Tim Boggess](#)

Organization: Northwest Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA

Denomination: Presbyterian Church (USA)

19th Sunday after Pentecost - Year A

Philippians 4:1-9

In his essay on the state of the modern American marriage, the philosopher Alain de Botton wastes no time in getting to the point:

It's one of those things we are most afraid might happen to us. We go to great lengths to avoid it. And yet we do it all the same: We marry the wrong person.[1]

Ouch. No one wants to hear that. Especially not a couple standing at the altar about to take the leap into holy matrimony. Which is precisely where I've been using it lately. All I can say is it's a good thing that the bride and groom have their backs to the congregation. You wouldn't want to put those expressions into a photo album.

De Botton, of course, doesn't end there, and neither do I. He goes on to say that we come to this realization no matter how compatible we appear to be, no matter how much love we feel for one another, and no matter how well we think we already know our betrothed. This is because the time will come when we make the sobering discovery that our spouse happens to be a human being. And, as a human being, he or she is maddeningly and consistently imperfect. Just like us. Marital disenchantment, he argues, is democratic. Sooner or later, it happens to us all.

I think he's right, but not only about marriage. Given enough time, I think the same thing happens in every significant relationship in our lives. We become disenchanted. One day we realize that the person we thought we knew isn't the person we see standing before us. The habits we once ignored are starting to annoy. Our patience is tested. Our blinders are off. At which point, we're confronted with a choice. Will we stay in this marriage, this friendship, this relationship, and do the hard work of getting to know this new - this *real* - person, or will we go looking somewhere else for someone else?

And church is no exception. Stay in one long enough, and you will find plenty that disappoints. After all, churches are full of people, and you know how people are. As Jesus once said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, someone's feelings are going to get hurt." Okay, he didn't say that. Or if he did, we don't have any record of it. But he didn't have to. We know it's true. No matter how hard we try, we all end up feeling like we have joined the wrong church.

But why are we so surprised when this happens? The disciples didn't always get along. James and John irritated the others when they asked Jesus for reserved seats in heaven. Peter had impulse control issues. Nathanael had a sharp tongue. Thomas felt left out. Judas thought he had hitched his wagon to the wrong Messiah. It all added up. And just what was Levi the tax collector doing among them? Even fishermen had standards, for heaven's sake.

And we forget that most of what we call the New Testament is really an extended treatise on conflict resolution. Paul wrote his church letters to address issues that were threatening the very fabric of their common lives. Each letter was an intervention. With the Galatians, it was membership requirements that were disturbing the peace. With the Corinthians, it was communion. The Colossians had a diversity issue. And the Philippians had Euodia and Syntyche. Yes, even the Philippians had problems.

By all accounts, the Philippian church was Paul's pride and joy, his favorite child. You can feel it in his letter. He writes to this Macedonian church with such affection that one commentator gives this letter the subtitle, "The Apostle and His Friends." [2] And yet, even here, the ties that bind can become frayed if given enough time. Euodia and Syntyche, two leaders of that

congregation, were at odds with one another, people were taking sides, and things were beginning to get ugly. (It probably had something to do with the hymns. It always does.) Whatever it was, it was bad enough that word got back to Paul through the bars of his prison cell, perhaps from as far away as Rome.

The easy thing to do to preserve the peace in the Philippian church would be for the two women to go their separate ways and take their people with them. Problem solved. Churches and denominations do it all the time. Church growth through division. Amoebic Christianity. But Paul wasn't interested in keeping the peace. He was interested in making it. He didn't want the Philippians to give up on one another. Instead, he wanted them to double-down on Jesus.

So, from his cell, he puts pen to papyrus and writes: "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." *Be of the same mind in the Lord.* Paul is saying, whatever differences you may have, don't let that be one of them. For, if that is lost, then all is lost. You may be of a different mind in just about everything else, just be of the same mind in the Lord. Agree on that one thing. Agree on Jesus.

I think we could all use more of that in our churches. Being of the same mind in the Lord. Focusing on the one who brought us together and who holds us together still. Especially today, when so many of our members are of a different mind about so many things. Especially today, when our current political climate has exposed fissures in our churches that we never imagined were there. Especially today, when conversations are quickly turning into confrontations. Especially today, when we're starting to think that we may have joined the wrong church. Be of the same mind in the Lord.

And that goes for everyone. "Help these women," Paul writes, with the understanding that by helping these women they are helping themselves. After all, they are the body of Christ. Which is to say, they are in it together.

When I tell a bride and groom that they are about to marry the wrong person, I'm also quick to tell them that it's okay. It's not their fault. It's unavoidable. We all do it. And it doesn't really matter.

What really matters is what you do once you realize what you've done. For while thinking you have married the wrong person might feel like the end, it is actually just the beginning. Or, it can be. If you let it. That's because you now have the opportunity to take ownership of your love, and make it truly yours. Now you can stop worrying about whether you married the right person and can instead start working on being the right person for the one to whom you are married. As de Botton writes:

The person who is best suited to us is not the person who shares our every taste (he or she doesn't exist), but the person who can negotiate differences in taste intelligently - the person who is good at disagreement - it is the capacity to tolerate differences with generosity that is the true marker of the 'not overly wrong' person. Compatibility is an achievement of love; it must not be its precondition.[3]

In other words, love takes work, and the sooner we realize this, the better off we will be.

The same could be said for the church. The church that is best suited to us is not the one that shares our every taste. Such a church doesn't exist. Just ask Euodia and Syntyche. Rather, the church that is best suited to us is the church that can negotiate differences in taste intelligently - the church that is good at disagreement. It is the one that is able to tolerate differences with generosity. The church that is best suited to us is the one that sees compatibility as an achievement and not an accident.

There are no perfect marriages and there are no perfect churches, for the simple reason that there are no perfect people. But there are many beautiful marriages and there are many beautiful churches. And they all have one thing in common. They are committed to love one another, whether they feel like it or not.

Which is what Paul is trying to get Euodia and Syntyche to do. He isn't interested in which one of them is right. That's not important. It doesn't matter. Because they're both wrong. They're wrong in the way that they are treating one another. And when that is wrong in the church, nothing else can be right.

Jean Paul Sartre, the French existentialist, famously wrote that "Hell is other people." [4] We all get that sentiment. It's easier to be alone. Getting along takes work. Getting to know - and letting yourself be known by - someone else, takes courage, commitment and compassion. And none of those come easily. Which is why so many have decided that church is just too much trouble; and belonging to no church is better than belonging to the wrong one.

The truth is, love is hard, and love is messy. It has always been. It always will be. The Bible never pretends it to be otherwise. Christians, of all people, should know this by now. After all, there's nothing harder or messier than the cross. And nothing more loving.

Once, when I was asked to give the charge to a candidate for ordination, I said that the one thing I've learned about the church is that there's nothing like it. When you stand in the pulpit and can feel the Holy Spirit turning your words into The Word, there's nothing like it. When you get to baptize the baby, whose parents thought they might never be able to have, there's nothing like it. When you see the line of people coming forward to receive communion, people of all ages and abilities united only by their common hunger and thirst for God, there's nothing like it. There are so many sweet and sacred moments I've experienced in my life that I would have missed if not for the church. When church is good, there is nothing like it.

But, when there is conflict in the church, there is nothing like *it*, either. Do I need to give examples? I didn't think so. You know exactly what I'm talking about. We've all known our share of Euodias and Syntyches. And, if we're honest, we've probably been them as well. Church is a blessing, and church is a burden. There's no way around it. As the Catholic mystic of the last century, Carlo Carretto, wrote:

People who are dreaming of something different from this reality are simply wasting time and keep going back to the beginning again. Moreover, they show that they have not understood man. Because this is man, just as the Church shows him to be, in his wickedness and, at the

same time, in his invincible courage, which faith in Christ has given him, and the love of Christ has him live.^[5]

There is nothing like the church. This is true because people are in it. It is even more true because God is in it. And it's this second truth that makes the first truth worth all the trouble. Jesus says: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." [6] Paul writes, "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."

In their different ways, they are both saying the same thing. Hell isn't other people. Heaven is. So, we better learn how to get along.

Amen.

1 Alain de Botton, "Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person," *New York Times*, May 28, 2016.

2 Kenneth Grayston, *The Letters of Paul to the Philippians and to the Thessalonians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 11.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Jean Paul Sarte. *No Exit*. 1944 (1.5).

[5] Carlo Carretto. *The God Who Comes* (New York: Maryknoll, 1974), 186-187.

6 Matthew 18:20, NRSV

What are we called to reject and what are we called to embrace these days? We'll be exploring this question this Sunday, October 11 during our two worship services. For those who like to read the scripture passages ahead of time, they will be Exodus 32:1-14 and Philippians 4:1-9.

Our in-person outdoor service is at 8 a.m. Please wear a mask when you come. Here is a video about what to expect at such a service: <https://apcusa.org/2020/09/17/apc-outside-worship-welcome/>

We have space for a maximum of 50 socially-distanced chairs set up on the north lawn. We ask that by Saturday at noon the day before that you register to attend the worship service at this link: <https://reopen.church/r/iAXOMJdG> We do this registration to make sure we have adequate seating and to have contact information for attendees just in case there develops a need for contact tracing.

For those who plan to watch our **livestream service at 10 a.m.** here is the [livestream link](#) for the worship service. We will also have a **Fancy Fellowship** at 11:15 this Sunday. Visit with your church family. Here is the link to that gathering: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88994340216>

Here are some other items of news:

The **APC Nominating Committee** is looking for a few good women and men to serve as Ruling Elders and Deacons. **Ruling Elders** are responsible for the overall management of APC. They serve on Session, meeting one evening per month, and participate in one of the following councils: Christian Education, Congregational Life, Finance, Mission, Personnel, Property, Stewardship, or Worship and Music, usually meeting one additional evening per month. **Deacons** are called and empowered by God to serve the sick, the hungry, the friendless, and those in distress both within the congregation and in the community beyond. To learn more about the specific programs and services that Deacons provide, contact your APC Deacon. If you would like to be considered for Ruling Elder or Deacon, or if you know someone who would like to serve, **please contact one of the members of the Nominating Committee by November 1:**

Tiffany Clark mstrichardson@gmail.com Justin Feil justinfeil4@gmail.com Ralph McDevitt ralphmcdevitt3@gmail.com or Bill Thygeson wthygeson@gmail.com

This is a great opportunity to serve your church and to enjoy fellowship with your congregation! We look forward to hearing from you. Thank you!

Our congregation has been actively standing against systemic racism and implicit bias in our society. As a response to God's call for justice and equity for all, the church's **Anti-Racism Team invites you to engage in a special event.** Responding to our call to be A House of Prayer for ALL People, as well as God's desire for us to love justice, we are inviting your family to participate in an independent viewing of the film "Just Mercy" and a follow-up online discussion. In this way we hope to be inspired to keep justice in mind in our daily lives, and to

spread the message in our society. "Just Mercy" is a powerful story about justice and redemption. It tells the true story of Walter McMillan, who, with the help of young defense attorney Bryan Stevenson, appeals his murder conviction. The film is based on the memoir of the same name, written by Stevenson.

Here are the dates for these anti-racism activities:

On **Sunday, October 25**, the church is holding a drive-through food drive, 11:15-noon. During that time, we will distribute discussion materials and popcorn for your family screening. In the week following, we would like you to watch "Just Mercy" via a streaming service if available in your home, or a DVD rental. We will make arrangements to borrow a copy to provide to you if you are unable to secure one.

Following the 10 a.m. Livestream worship service on **Sunday, November 1**, we'll join in a discussion of the film via Zoom. We will distribute a SignUp Genius shortly. To let us know who is participating, we ask that you complete the document, including whether or not you can access the film online or need a physical copy. If you have questions, contact Pastor Aaron atwitchell@apcusa.org, 215-887-4530

Since October 25 is **Pledge Dedication Sunday**, when you come to bring food for the food cupboard or to pick up your movie items, you are also invited to bring your 2021 pledge card to turn in when you come to the parking lot. Or you can mail it to the church office at 1082 Old York Road, Abington, PA 19001, or you can fill out your pledge card on our website – www.apcusa.org Thank you! We will also have resource materials for you and your family to pick up that day – a children's bible storybook or hymnals for those who want them.

APC Members have also been invited to a timely panel discussion on **Racial Justice and Improving Race Relations in our Communities**, put on by the Social Action Committee of our friends at Old York Road Temple-Beth Am. Aaron Twitchell will be co-moderator of the panel discussion. The Zoom event will be Tuesday, October 20 at 7 p.m. There is no charge to attend. [CLICK HERE](#) to join the Zoom meeting.

I hope you will take advantage of some of the wonderful things happening –

Kirby Lawrence Hill

As one of the co-vice presidents of the Social Action Committee of Old York Road Temple-Beth Am, I would like to invite you to participate in an extremely timely and important panel

discussion on Racial Justice and Improving Race Relations in our communities that the Social Action Committee will be hosting, along with the Reverend Aaron Twitchell of Abington Presbyterian Church, through Zoom on **October 20, at 7:00 PM**. I told each of the panel members that I would be asking you to email me questions you would like included in our discussion. Someone emailed me a question that I will pass on as an example: Why do we say Black Lives Matter and not All Lives Matter?

Our panel will include:

- Mary Baxter, a prison reform activist who worked with Senators Harris, Warren, Booker, and Durbin to support the Dignity for Incarcerated Women Act
- Robin Robinson, a member of the Philadelphia Police Department
- Mikael Yisrael, Director of Equity, Justice, and Engagement at Abington Friends School
- Samuel Rodriguez, founder of Walls for Justice
- Charmaine Ijeoma, a member of Old York Road Temple-Beth Am.

Please email your questions to me at fgoldste@mc3.edu.

[CLICK HERE](#) to join in on the discussion

Meeting ID # is 853 8231 1494.

Dear APC Members and Friends –

This Sunday, October 4, is **World Communion Sunday**, when Christians around the world will be celebrating our unity in Christ. In recent years, we have had many kinds of bread from around the world to celebrate the rich diversity of God's children. This year, with pandemic concerns, is different. For those who plan to come to our 8:00 a.m. in-person outdoor worship on the church's north lawn, you will pick up an individual communion packet as you arrive. This packet will have a sealed communion bread wafer and a sealed grape juice cup which we will use to all receive the elements safely. Here is a video about what to expect at such a service: <https://apcusa.org/2020/09/17/apc-outside-worship-welcome/>

We have space for a maximum of 50 socially-distanced chairs set up on the north lawn. We ask that by Saturday at noon the day before that you register to attend the worship service at this link: <https://reopen.church/r/iAXOMJdG> We do this registration to make sure we have adequate seating and to have contact information for attendees just in case there develops a need for contact tracing.

For those who plan to watch our **livestream service at 10 a.m.** or later, we encourage you to go to our new website where you will find recipes for ten different kinds of bread from around the world. The suggestion is that you might make a loaf of bread for your own communion observance at home, and also make a loaf to share with a neighbor. Here is the link: <https://apcusa.org/2020/10/01/world-communion-sunday-feasting/>

Our scripture readings for this Sunday are Psalm 19 and Philippians 3:4-14 with the sermon entitled, "After Christ Makes Us His Own." You should have received your stewardship mailing in recent days. John Dean will make our first stewardship presentation on Sunday. Here is the [livestream link](#) for the worship service.

We are thankful for **initial gatherings** this past week for our nursery school, our music and arts class for children, and our handbell rehearsals. Everything has been going well with each of these programs following strict pandemic protocols for safety.

Our congregational anti-racism team has been talking about the importance of voting. I join them in encouraging all of us to vote in the upcoming election.

Here are PA voting deadlines:

Monday, October 19 - deadline to register to vote (you can register online, by mail, in person at your county's voter registration office, at PennDOT or at select other government agencies)

Tuesday, October 27 - deadline to request mail-in or absentee ballot which must then be postmarked by 8 PM on Tuesday, Nov. 3 AND received by 5 PM on Friday, November 6 (**apply and mail well ahead of these deadlines and follow the instructions carefully!**)

Tuesday, November 3 - in-person voting from 7 AM to 8 PM (mid-morning has traditionally been a less busy time of day)

If you have any questions, visit votespa.com or call 1-877-VOTESPA.

With gratitude to our Lord who invites us to table fellowship,

Kirby Lawrence Hill

