

Sermon on Philippians 2, 1-4, 30.07.2006

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy spirit be with us all. Amen.

Text:

1)So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, 2)complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3)Doing nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. 4)Let each of you look not only to his own interest, but also to the interests of others.

Dear Congregation,

Did you notice it, too? Paul does not say one bad word about this congregation in Philippi. On the contrary! He has much good to say about it:

“I see all the things that are going so well with you:

- Through God’s word, you let yourself be directed on the right way, and you are able to correct wrong decisions on the basis of faith.
- People find comfort with you.
- You experience a profound community, which is not only due to your friendship or the fact that you get along so well with one other.
- You approach each other with love and don’t bear grudges.

“And all that is wonderful and I am truly very happy about it”, says Paul. “But I would even be happier if you would go beyond this and would achieve a high degree of harmony, by

- being of one mind
- having love
- being of one opinion and in harmony.

How do you achieve this?

- By not doing anything out of selfishness, according to the motto, what do I, personally, gain by this?
- By not expecting to be continuously in the foreground and, indeed, be noticed and recognized;
- but by disregarding yourself,
- be humble, that means, serve, support and respect others
- and pay attention to how you can serve each other.”

Presumably, we all think the same thing, when we realize: Well, this is indeed a lot that Paul desires from the congregation. Must we also do this? What can we achieve from this long list, what are the deficits? Can one perhaps cross out something here and there, or is this like a catalogue of criteria, against which each congregation must be measured – and if so, how do we measure up?

I think that texts like this one first of all makes it clear to us how the ideal Christian community could be. And I find that it is good that we are not groping in total darkness in terms of what constitutes a group of Christians. I find it helpful that we have an extensive description of an example of the development of a Christian congregation from someone who has been an eyewitness and who has experienced very different and distinctive features of congregational life. He has much experience, he knows what is important and he also knows what can go wrong, when Christian congregations totally ignore such foundations. Paul is to be taken seriously as advisor. This is the one point

The other is, that even though we hear how wonderful it could be and begin to develop the feeling that we perhaps are unable to fulfill all criteria, we should not have a bad feeling according to the motto: So that is how it is, we lack this and that, therefore we do not care at all, in order not to go home totally frustrated. This, however, is not the meaning of this text!

I think, to be a congregation is similar to playing the piano. There are countless people who play the piano, I have also tried it once before. Playing the piano does not only bring joy when one is as proficient as a virtuoso. But the better one can play the more fun it is. And if one struggles extremely hard with finger practice and easy Mozart pieces, the visit of a piano concert can be a new motivation, to put in exert effort.

It is always a process to be a congregation, certainly by following one or another ideal, but a good example, as this congregation in Philippi, can indeed motivate us to perfect one thing or another and to simply become better in some aspects, even though many things are already good.

By the way, I am not here today to criticize. I want to make Paul's nature my own here and say: Many things go very well here. I am truly thankful that so many people become involved here and participate in whatever needs to be done:

- The sheds of the day care had to be taken down this week, and the men of the maintenance committee appear immediately and the work is done in a blink.
- Others help with the history book of the church. Even though the group is somewhat apprehensive that the result of nearly two years of work may not convince everyone, or that others would have done it differently, they have, however spent countless hours to collect information and shape it into a certain form.
- There are very many among us who care for others. There are many who pay visits or make phone calls and inquire as to the well-being of congregational members.
- There is a whole group of responsible people in the Church Council, who, under the leadership of a dedicated President, give their best to manage the matters of the congregation.
- Take last Sunday, when nearly 150 persons came to remember Pastor Schwantes and to honour his memory.

These are all things which Paul would have found to be good. Here, also, people find comfort and are received. There is community here, too, which, not in all respects, but in many cases, has something to do with friendship. There is understanding here, too, and love among each other, which helps to withstand some differences and disagreements, and where one can say things to each other, as one knows each other, even though the tone could sometimes be nicer, or, indeed, where we must learn to think more as "we" and not "I".

What I want to point out is that we are willing to recognize also the good things in our congregation. But the other thing is also, and then it would certainly be more fun to be together here, if we continued to work on the things which we do not master well, yet.

You see, this is about a concept of humanity. We all are, as far as this is concerned, amateurs, but with some encouragement and practice we can come closer to the ideal of a Christian congregation, as Paul describes it here. It is the Biblical path, how we manage our togetherness with others.

To come back once again to the piano playing: It is not the case that this was the concert hall, but our practice hour is here. Each week we have the opportunity to test, how much we have grown in matters of "love" and "harmony". Here we meet people whom we have not chosen, but who are brought together by God, and who, the longer the more, have become responsible for each other.

We can try out here how we succeed, also in difficult question or difficult times to get along with each other. Here we can plan and work to realize common goals. No reputation of the individual exists here, because everyone is invited to take part, even though, in many cases, this is still theory, and a few people do much and many do practically nothing, or where a few make many decision and many feel that they have nothing to say.

But once again: We can learn here to put into practice in the world out there what we have learned here.

Time and again we are surprised what kind of problems there are between people. We are shocked that so many couples divorce, or parents cannot deal with their children, or that there are ever more conflicts in the world – at the moment, the Near East has again become a powder keg. All this has to do with the fact that people do not have a place, where they learn in a small environment how to love each other and solve conflicts.

I believe that we Christians have been given an extremely important role in this world. Not as we experience it at the present, when Christians are becoming infected by the terrorism and fundamentalism of the others and think they have to pay back with same means, but less spectacular, but lasting and much more effective if we become centres of humanity, as individuals, as groups and not allow that images of enemies emerge, that people entrench themselves into their opinion without having to make the effort to get along with people who are of a different opinion. We, as a congregation, can truly be the places where we learn how to love, to dispute, to support others, and even as children are introduced the values necessary for the realization of Democracy and peace.

I want to give you an example once again. On Monday evening, I saw the rerun of the program on CBC, about a man who had collected donations, bought drilling machines and went with his family to Guatemala for eight months, to bore wells for drinking water. He has dug ten wells since November and hereby provided drinking water for almost 10,000 people. The native team that gathered there is building schools. Presents are being distributed, which children in Catholic schools in Ontario have packed into shoe boxes. By the way, the Guatemalan children were delighted with so many shoe boxes, they did not even dare rip the wrapping paper – they had never seen anything like this. A man, a family who accompanies him, a few private persons, churches and schools support the project. Everything was manageable, financially sound and not the least problem for the individual groups. And yet, this project effects thousands of people, who have clean drinking water, and furthermore learn through this example that every effort pays off and that even the individual can achieve movement. When this man was asked in an interview why he had done all this, he simply said: “Because my faith teaches me to support others.”

That is, summarized in one sentence that, which Paul says in this sermon text. The faith in Jesus Christ should lead us to support others and to continuously improve as time goes on. Amen.

And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.