

Series: "Valuable Words for a Church on the Move"

Sermon: "Discernment"

Text: Philippians 1:1-11

RGJR/FBCCS/9-13-20 UNEDITED

- Social signals can be confusing right now. Symbolic gestures are easily misunderstood and even taken to mean the opposite of what was intended.
- When nearly every passing play became open to official interpretation by video replay and I could no longer tell when a pass was a catch, I got frustrated and quit watching much NFL football. I suppose the quick downfall of the Broncos also added to my disinterest. Then NFL football turned into a mish mash of hard-to-interpret social and political statements and that sealed the deal for me.
- However, I saw an article about the recent opening game between the Texans and the Chiefs. It was about the pre-game symbolism and how the limited crowd allowed to attend the game received it. The "public" seemed to be quite confused by the different symbolic acts enacted by the players.
- Those on the field were also confused. One well-known defensive end had this to say about the crowd's response of booing when the two teams linked arms and spread across the field before the start of the game. Quote...
- *"The moment of unity I personally thought was good," the star defensive end told reporters after the game. "I mean the booing during that moment was unfortunate. I don't fully understand that. There was no flag involved. There was nothing involved other than two teams coming together to show unity."*
- I think what this "star defensive end" didn't quite realize was that a "symbolic display of unity" is meaningless when there is no real unity underlying the symbolism. The mere *appearance* of "unity" just for the sake of the appearance is confusing and ultimately worthless.

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- The players had already demonstrated their *disunity* by earlier disparate responses to the "Star Spangled Banner" and then what was being called the "black national anthem," the song, "Lift Every Voice and Sing." There was no unity in shown here so acting unified a few moments hence seemed to make some of the crowd confused and even angry.
- Fake unity—the symbolic appearance of unity—when there is no real unity of values beneath the surface is ultimately confusing and creates anger in a community of people rather than the acceptance some try to fake for their own, often selfish, motives.
- **OH! BTW:** this is just as true in a *church community* as it is in a community of fans attending a sporting event.
- However, given the many times the word "love" shows up in Scripture and the command of Jesus that we are to love one another as he loved us, it is very difficult for many believers to be honest about disunity in the church.
- Acting unified can feel like the loving thing to do in a church community. It means that much of the time there is less open "church-fighting" and this means "going to church on Sunday" can be more comfortable.
- It is even more helpful if a church is big enough that a person can avoid someone with whom they disagree deeply all together by sitting far away or even attending at another service time. There is an outward appearance of unity.
- When sometimes clashes do happen, they are swept under the rug as quickly as possible to maintain this appearance.
- When there are big changes in life—life as we are used to living—or church-life as we are used to experiencing, it is more likely that there will be outbreaks of disagreement.

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- When God asks a church community to walk together in *liminal* places—borderlands between two different paradigms of doing church--and this inevitably creates more ambiguity about the details future—maintaining the appearance of unity becomes more and more difficult.
- However, in many churches you'll still find people sweeping desperately to get things out of sight "under the rug." They will do almost anything to keep that appearance of unity and the comfort and convenience and false sense of control it can bring and call what they are doing "love."
- Do you think this is what Paul was after with the Corinthians when he opened a letter to them saying: "***I appeal to you brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.***"...?
- Let's grant for the moment that "perfectly united in mind and thought" probably doesn't mean the Apostle was calling for them all to have the same favorite color or the same favorite flavor of ice cream. That's not his point. He is clearly talking about something deeper than personal preferences.
- He is talking about what truly unites them—no mere appearance of unity. He is thinking of their values that move them as a church of Jesus Christ.
- The fact that they were forming factions around various human leaders in the church made it evident that they were not united in their governing values. Their unity was no more real than two NFL football teams linking arms before trying to kill each other in a game.

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- Let me remind you of what I said last week that explains why we are again considering Paul's letter to the Philippians at such a time as this.
- An unattributed quote used by a seminary president and then used by me without attribution suggested ***"Scarcity leads to clarity, priority and creativity."***
- I suggested it could also lead rather to *"fear, anger, and conflict."*
- The "scarcity" raised by the seminary president wasn't a scarcity of food or water but rather a scarcity of what we have been used to and feel comfortable with. It is a sense of scarcity produced by change we feel has been forced on us or by a feeling of sacrifice we are being pushed to make.
- For people who live relatively comfortable and safe lives like ours this matter of "scarcity" brings ambiguity because it puts us in a liminal place between what was and what will be. Most of us just flat out don't like to be in that place that feels uncomfortable and, frankly, out of our control.
- It is that uncomfortable liminality can lead us to clarity, priority and creativity or fear, anger and conflict.
- I tried last week to point out how a clear pattern God has revealed to us in Scripture warns us that any fear, anger and conflict change brings will often be acted out on those closest to us brother to brother, sister to sister—Philippian church lady *Syntyche* to Philippian church lady *Euodia*—which sealed the deal for me to head to Philippians.
- We are experiencing liminal living because of a Covid 19 pandemic, because of social tensions ramping up in our nation, because of horrible political division. For relatively comfortable American-

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Church folks these can eventually make us feel the ambiguity of not having any idea of what is coming.

- Then, as a church community, on top of all of these, we decided, long before most of these life-changes were even on the horizon—we decided that God was giving us an opportunity to move forward on the mission of FBC. Selling this facility—actually more this valuable location we could retool for our free-grace—missional future as a church.
- That may put some of you in an even more uncomfortable spot. You know I don't think of the church in terms of a building. "**We** are the church." However, I couldn't resist this symbolic picture of a church afloat as I thought how some of us might feel like we have been cast off and "set afloat" by the choices we have made to change a big symbolic part of FBC by selling what we are used to and comfortable in.
- Notice the lake upon which we are floating freely has no waves. Don't be mistaken, the waves will show up. We can choose to let the waves lead us to clarity, priority and creativity together or we can allow the waves to make us fearful, angry and create conflict among us.
- What will make the difference? True unity. Not an appearance of unity. Not sweeping disagreements under the rug to hide them and maintain a façade but true unity in purpose in the Lord Jesus Christ for his mission for us.
- Let's be honest as we can up front. It is not my wish, not my desire, but this may mean God sends some of us in different directions.
- As frightening as that sounds to those of us who have sometimes been taught to make a church *appear* unified no matter what, it

might mean with unity and love for each other we do some new things apart from each other.

- I have been arguing with God about that possibility and I think he has won and given me peace. Real unity doesn't have to look like the appearance of unity churches often try to project.
- But how will we know? These are such crazy, liminal places to find ourselves in and such crazy thinking that FBC could be that different, how will we know?
- Let's be as honest as we can about wanting to know. Very often, we want to know because knowing gives a stronger feeling of control than living in liminal places with ambiguity and having to trust God with no proof.
- Then lets also recognize that the reason such things may sound so crazy—other than they might just be crazy—is that we are prone to evaluating church ideas and changes on the basis of our own comfort and convenience. New ideas for mission are great if they meet certain standards for comfort and convenience. Go too far out of the norm's we are used to and we determine the ideas must be bad ideas.
- Folks, because of the circumstances of living right now, the opportunities we have for mission and the heart desires of some of us, we are walking into the "far out" space of liminality for FBC, by CHOICE! Now that will indeed sound crazy to some.
- So, again, I ask, how will we know? How will we decide things?
- The Philippian church was entering a time like this but not by choice. Paul will recognize just a few verses further in chapter 1 on the letter that these people are going through or about to go through persecution for their faith in Christ. He says in 1:29 ***"For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but***

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also suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have."

- Change was coming. Sacrifice was coming. Would it call that church to clarity, priority and creativity or to fear, anger and conflict? A couple of prominent women were already fighting. This wouldn't do if the church was to fulfill its mission in this new, liminal time they faced to the glory and praise of God.
- Most of you know this letter well but let me point out some things that set the context. Then we can see how Paul answers the question, "How will they know when they don't seem to know anything and the foundation for knowing seems to be shifting? How will they be able to "***discern***" things when they are beginning to feel cast loose and afloat?"
- Look at verses 1 and 2. ***READ Philippians 1:1-2***
- The Apostle Paul includes his younger partner-minister, Timothy, as a sender of the letter. As he often does, but ***not*** without an important purpose, Paul designates Timothy and himself as "***servants.***"
- The answer to so many disagreements in the church that have to be swept under the rug to try to maintain a look of love and unity is found right there in that self-designated title—"servants!"
- If only, all the time, absolutely all of us would only and always see ourselves, and live accordingly, only as "***servants***" (even ***slaves***) of the Lord we would never try to fight one another for preeminence, significance, validation and personal wins in the church.
- Too bad we don't always see ourselves that way—which, by the way Paul says in a bit, is how Jesus saw himself as he walked this earth.
- The brothers and sisters of the church in Philippi are all the same in that they are all "***saints***"—all set apart vessels for God's use—God's

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mission. Not a one of them can say "church" is a part-time" thing—just another segment they have added on to their life alongside other things like work, family, recreation and so on.

- Yet even though all exactly the same as saints, they don't all play the same role in the body there in Philippi. There are "*epikopois*" in the church. This gets translated sometimes as overseers and other times as bishops. Sometimes it is likely equivalent to "elders." Whatever they were called, in Philippi, they were men who were responsible to care for the church—to guard it. Likely they were to watch over truth claims and see if they aligned with Scripture but they were also charged with watching over lives to see if they aligned with the truth taught by Scripture.
- Then there were "*Diakonos*"—deacons—servants who likely helped with various needs for people in keeping with the mission.
- They all needed continual "*grace*" and *peace*"—but only the sort that was supernaturally supplied by God the Father and the Lord Jesus. What did they need these for? Just to have a happy life there in Philippi? Look at verses 3-6 and Paul shows why.
- **READ Philippians 1:3-6**
- The reality is that even though they are separated by miles geographically, they are still partners in a mission—the Gospel mission. The word for partners comes from "*koinonia*" and, for Paul it means they are connected by the Spirit on this mission even when separated.
- Paul finds great joy in thinking about this Spirit connected, supernatural partnership with the Philippians when it comes to mind. He hadn't had to coerce these people into joining the mission. They were with him from the first day they knew of it.

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- Of course, the mission is not accomplished by the strength of Paul or the Philippians or by them combined. It is the faithful work of Jesus himself that will complete God's mission through them all.
- Does this joy have a "feeling" along with it? Absolutely! Feelings are part of this matter of humans being together on God's Holy-Spirit connected mission that Christ is completing.
- Even if he is in prison, Paul can still feel the emotion accompanying the joy knowing that they all share God's unfailing grace. The mission is real. It is powerful. It sets even imprisoned hearts free!
- That truth—that reality with respect to the Philippians—fills Paul up with emotion. The result is he misses his partners—his dear friends in Jesus Christ. He longs to be with them.
- Please don't ever conclude those teachers who emphasize Scriptural truth must not feel love for those they teach. Truth was Paul's focus but he deeply loved those who he taught.
- The truth is God is a work in the Philippians to help complete their shared mission and Paul is filled with emotional love and joy because of all that this means.
- So, that must mean everything is fine, right?? Maybe not. The changes are coming. The liminality looms. The ambiguity arrives. The opportunity to have clarity, priority and creativity or fear, anger and conflict presents itself. Fake unity won't sustain through the scarcity and the cracks may already be showing in the fight between to ladies of the church.
- So...Paul prays for these beloved partners in the Gospel mission. Look at verse 9-11. Look at what he prays they will have to make it through and how they will get what they will need.
- ***READ Philippians 1:9-11***

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- Paul wants love but notice he wants a certain character of love. Fake love—fake unity won't get them across the bridge in liminal times. Paul prays that their love for one another will be real because it increasingly abounds in "knowledge" and "deep insight." In other words, their love grows in knowing the truth of reality and in understanding what is really happening.
- Now what do they get—and it is something they will desperately need as they walk through the days ahead together? If their love will be sustained by the truth and by insights into reality instead of only looking at appearances and veneers of fake unity and love—what will they get? They will get *discernment*—they will be able to *discern* what is truly best—the right choices—even when the ambiguity of liminal living provides so little evidence of what to do next.
- The discernment Paul longs for and prays for in the Philippian church is not decision-making that comes from scientific data or business acumen or a pedigree of worldly success.
- The discernment Paul wants them to have comes from honestly—truthfully—actually loving each other—getting below the surface appearance into depths of insight into the reality versus the appearance.
- What will the result be? Will God promise then to tell them whether to move north or south? Will they know whether they are to buy a certain facility or lease another? What will the result be? What can they know will happen if they will love truly and thus become discerning?
- They can be certain the outcome will be "*pure and blameless*" living through the power of Jesus Christ that produces **success**! They will be assured of *getting it all perfectly right*.

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- **BUT**, will that success be the next mega-church? Will it be to be voted the ministry of the year? Will it be to accomplish a dream to have a certain church building in a certain place?
- NOPE! Those are not God's perfect results. Those are not what God counts as "getting it exactly right" when trying to find ones way through liminality.
- Perfection—success will be the righteous fruit of Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God alone. No praise for the Philippian Episkopoi—or diakonoi—for the Philippian overseers and deacons. No praise for the saints of Philippi. NO praise for Paul or Timothy. Only praise for God!
- After all, all these folks are ultimately servants of Jesus Christ. If they could only always perfectly live as those servants, love would abound in depth of insight and knowledge—true love—not faked love—and faked unity for personal comfort, and control.
- Right now, today, we—that is we as FBC need **discernment**. However, is the discernment we need most of all discernment about land deals and buildings and perfect programs to meet the needs of people and make them happy? Nope! That isn't what Paul prayed for nor what I pray for for us.
- I pray that we would have discernment that grows out of more than *human* expertise in any area. I pray we will have discernment that grows out of honestly loving people with knowledge of truth from Scripture and depth of insight instead of fixing the surface.
- Problem is, most of us have at least a streak of "do, fix and control in us. As a result, we are often pragmatists. Pragmatists don't like truth—reject teaching—eschew wisdom that doesn't have an A+B=C element to it. How can discernment that comes from true loving make successful decisions about buildings and real estate?

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- HMMM? $A+B=C$ isn't in there is it? If this is what is bothering us as we are asked to live in a liminal space—to face unknowns—to trust even in ambiguity—if this is making any of us fearful, angry and even making us want to fight each other—then maybe we aren't even considering the right equation!
- Maybe we are aiming at the wrong target of "success."
- Maybe something like truly loving one another and having a unity that is more than surface deep is what matters more than *where*, *when* and *how* we **meet** to express it.
- Maybe success isn't the next mega-church or even an FBC 3.0 that makes me comfortable.
- How will we discern the truth of what matters here? Oh, wait a second! Didn't Paul just pray that the Philippians would attain that discernment by focusing on loving one another with a love that is real because it both abounds with truth and with below-the-surface insight into each of our real needs?
- I believe he did just pray that as a measure of their successful living for God's glory.
- Maybe that's what we should be praying now, as we enter into this time of change that could bring God's glory and praise...or not!