

“Very special people”. Philippians 2:1-13

So, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Today for our meditations we have this section from Paul's letter to Christians in Philippi. He is writing to the Church of Jesus Christ, to the very special people – Christians, the people of God. One of the reasons why Paul wrote this letter was to instruct God's people how to live out our new Christian identity.

It is important to keep in mind that the apostle isn't giving us instructions how to become the Church, for we can't do that on our own. Whatever we do, whatever hard we try to lead holy lives, we can't become Christians on our own. For we can't change our identity, we can't make ourselves members of God's family, that is something that only true God Himself can do.

This fact determines how we are to think about ourselves. We are a unique community of God's chosen people, created not by the efforts of men, but by the Triune God Himself. The Church is not something we choose to establish.

It is created by the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is created here – at the baptismal font. It is sustained and nourished here – at the altar. It is built up here – from the pulpit. All of that is God's work, that is how He expands His Kingdom.

That is what we mean when we say in our Creed that we believe in the communion of saints. We believe that we have something very unique in common – that we all have received the same Holy Spirit of God, that the Spirit of Jesus indwells in us, and unites us with God the Father and with God the Son, and also with the entire community of God's saints. That is how special this community is.

We all, all human beings have certain God given longings built into our very nature. One of them is the need to belong. We want to be appreciated, we want to be recognized as special, and this is, indeed, one community where everyone is special.

How? Not because we are so special on our own. In the eyes of the world we may be the most ordinary people with the most ordinary lives. Fine, but how can then we be special? Because of Jesus. He makes you special.

Just think about this – you see at our Christian gathering someone whom you don't know. "Who are you? What are you doing here?" The answer comes: "Jesus invited me to come here to meet Him."

"Wow! That person was invited by Jesus Himself. That person must be really important, if Jesus Himself invited them to come." And that is true. Everyone whom the Father draws to Jesus is very special and very important for our God.

For He Himself formed you in your mother's womb, He has called you by name, He has chosen you, He has redeemed and rescued you, He has brought you here, and you are His – it is quite clear that for Him you are someone very special.

Think about this illustration. Think about the family members or friends of the celebrities of this world. How are they often perceived? "O, wow, you are friends with that person! Wow, you are her cousin, wow!" Suddenly people want to treat even the family members and friends of such celebrities in a special way.

What can we say?! It's not just that we know Jesus. It is so much more. Jesus knows us, He knows you, He welcomes us, He puts us in the spotlight for all the heavenly hosts: "Look, these are my friends, these are my brothers and sisters." And they all marvel at every little saint whom Jesus Himself has invited into His heavenly feast.

This is the picture that the Word of God gives us, but we tend to forget it, as did Christians in Philippi. Therefore, Paul's instructions are much needed for us as well. So how are we to live as such unique and special community of God's beloved?

On the one hand, it is actually embarrassing that we as Christians need such instructions. What does it tell about us? That, in fact, we often don't live out our new identity as people of the Gospel. That too often there are divisions and arguments, controversies in matters of the faith, self-promotion and selfish ambitions.

It was the case back then in Philippi, and it often is the case among Christians today. Therefore, everything that Paul instructs us about in today's reading, directs us to look away from the old self, towards Jesus and towards the needs of others.

That is so contrary to what our old self naturally tends to do, for we are so self-centred. "I didn't get anything out of today's service. I don't like this or that service order. I don't need to learn anything new; I already know everything I need to know. No one is going to tell me what to believe and how to live. This is no good and that is not good..." Such remarks are heard from time to time in every congregation.

This is why we need to be reminded what is fitting for God's people, and what is not. Remember, and Paul repeats it again, that the basis for us being together and being one holy community is the presence of the Holy Spirit among us.

He unites us. Our unity is not our doing, it is God the Father gathering His scattered and rebellious children into His family again. Similarly, also our new life as Christians is not our doing, it flows from the activity of God's Spirit in us.

It is the Spirit, who moves us to love one another and to reach out to comfort one another when needed. It is the Spirit, who sends us to deliver to our brothers and sister encouragement in Christ, or we could say – encouragement from Christ.

How may it look like? When we speak the Gospel to our brothers and sisters, both when they are okay, and especially when they are in need of support. For example, we can say with Paul: "Rejoice, rejoice always!"

"For you are very special for your Father in heaven. He Himself watched your conception. He watched your little body growing in your Mom's womb. He sent His messengers to call you to Himself. He knows everything about you.

He knows your worries, He can relate to every challenge, every loss, every fear, every suffering in your life, for He has endured more than any of us, and He is here to be with you, to walk with you, to support you. He listens to you before you speak.

Our journey through this valley of sorrows is short, but the place of refreshment and blessed joy is already prepared for you. Your Lord and Brother Jesus is waiting for you, to embrace you and to share with you in His divine glory. Rejoice!"

May the Holy Spirit fill you with such words of encouragement, so that they flow from your lips into ears and hearts of your fellow saints, and may such encouragement truly unite us as one.

Unity. Unity of faith is another thread of Paul's instruction. Again, so much needed. How good it is to live in unity! How sad it is when there is no unity, when one believes one thing, another believes something else, and when the unity in the Gospel itself is undermined with devilish slogans:

"Let's embrace diversity of opinions! We can still be united in one true faith, even as we hold to many different false faiths." It doesn't work that way. It didn't work back then, and it doesn't work today.

That is one of the reasons why Christians may not be willing to discuss the Word of God among themselves – for there is no unity. "Can I bring up this topic, or will it cause an argument? Can I say this, or some brothers and sisters will get upset?"

The lack of unity destroys Christian fellowship. This is why Paul writes: "Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." In our Lutheran Church we are blessed in a unique way, our Lord has granted us clearly formulated teachings. They are all here. In our book of

confessions, and even in our Theses of Agreement. But... how many even care about it? And how many more willingly listen to what the world preaches us, and passionately pick up ideas that are fashionable at the moment, instead of humbly listening to our Lord as He speaks to us in His Word.

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” This is amazing instruction.

Did you know that humility was by no means a virtue in the 1st century? Instead, power and ability to impose your will on others was considered virtuous. It was Jesus’ teaching and His self-sacrificial example that made humility a virtue.

But imagine, how wonderful can such community be, where people don’t fight for their significance, where everyone looks for others’ interests and considers others as more significant! Imagine, how wonderfully it would work!

Just compare this: imagine that you are fighting for your interests and trying to demonstrate your significance. And everyone else does the same. Most of time you won’t gain much. But now, imagine, that you do your best to look out for others, to serve them, to lift them up, and just think about it – everyone else does it for you!

How wonderful would that be! Now, is that what we are like? Is this how the outsiders would see us? As united in love and speaking the encouragement from Christ, and caring for others and keeping their interests first?

Who wouldn’t want to enjoy the blessings of such community? I know that it happens also in our midst. More importantly, Jesus knows that often you do exactly that. He knows and He is pleased with you: “Yes, these are my people!”

But still, often it is challenging to live that way. We need help with that. And that is exactly what our God gives us. We are not just called to think like Jesus and to be His imitators, even if that is also true. Remember, you are so much more.

You are the body of Christ. His own members. His family. United with Him by means of His own Spirit indwelling in you. How could we act against the will of our head?! He leads the way to go, and we follow Him.

Not in our strength, but in the power and with the encouragement of the One who leads us as our Servant, who humbled Himself to the point of death, and who know is so highly exalted that every knee shall bow before Him, and every tongues shall confess that this Jesus is the Lord Almighty.

I pray that the Holy Spirit keeps reminding you how special you are, how unique is our Christian fellowships, with the Father and the Son and with one another, and how beautiful is the life in unity of faith and mutual care to which our Lord Jesus has called us, and, perhaps, we may succeed in being little Jesus to one another.

Amen.