

"Work it out." Exodus 17:1-7; Ps. 78; Phil. 2:1-13; Matt. 21:23-32
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
Rev. David E. Young
September 28, 2008

We've just heard Jesus' parable about the two sons who were asked to work in the father's vineyard. Let's add a third character to Jesus' story:

Once there was a father who had three sons. When he asked the third son to go and work in the fields, the son said "Sure, Dad, anything you want." But as he walked to the field and as he cultivated the crops the son did nothing but complain and curse the father under his breath. Now, which of the three did the will of the father?

My thinking is that none of these did the father's will. They each, in their own way, broke the father's heart with their response to his request. The one who said "yes", but didn't follow through, the one who said "drop dead", but later relented and went, and the one who said "yes" and all the while muttered and complained - how is it that any of these truly did the will of the father?

But shouldn't there also be a fourth way? What if there was another child who responded by saying, "Yes, I will go work in the field", and then went and worked in humility and with a heart for service?

This, I think, is the point of contact between Jesus' parable and Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi.

On several occasions throughout this letter Paul exhorts them to be of the "same mind", to be of "one mind." It may seem as though he is calling for a lock-step rigidity uniformity in their thinking, but as we read further we get better insight into the kind of singleness of mind

that Paul is talking about. He is using Christ as the model for what it means to be of one mind and shows why this is possible even in a community of strong-minded individuals as were in the church there in Philippi, and as have been in every church in every time and place ever since.

He uses the example of Jesus who, in effect, said: "Yes, Father, I will go and work in the fields among the people you have called and claimed as your own." To curb their independent and self-serving tendencies Paul wants his beloved friends in Philippi to remember the story of Jesus and look to him for the example of how to be of one mind.

Paul wants them to remember that Jesus, even though he is God's Son, nevertheless chose to take up the limitations of humanity. Paul quotes a marvelous hymn to Jesus which points to Jesus' obedience to God through his suffering, humiliation and death.

It is Jesus' total obedience to God which is the key to his exaltation. Humility and a heart for service point the path to glory.

Paul follows up on this hymn to Jesus by exhorting his beloved people in Philippi to be obedient to what he has taught them. He writes: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

How odd... How do we work out our own salvation? We cannot save ourselves, so why is Paul asking us to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling? Is he really trying to imply that it is possible?

The key to understanding this peculiar phrase lies in the word "your". It is not singular, but plural. He is not telling each of us, individually, to figure out our own salvation. Rather he is telling the body of Christ, the church, to work on it and work it out together.

I think what Paul is stressing is that has given them the tools of the knowledge of Jesus Christ and his sacrifice for them. He has taught them the fundamentals of the faith and the grace of God which undergirds all of life. They have been receptive to the teaching and obedient to the teacher while they were in school, (as it were), with Paul.

Now that the teacher is gone and they have graduated, they are to apply what they have learned to their daily lives. They have to work out what it means to be saved and to live as saved people.

As they work it out, they are also to remember that God is at work in them, helping to make it all possible.

This is a powerful word to the church today. We are called to work together with humility and singleness of purpose, to work out together what it means to be saved, and to remember that God is still at work in us to bring it all to completion.

There is work to be done - work by us and work by God. The work that we have to do is to get out of the way of God's ability to work in and through us. This means we have to believe that God is at work in us. It also means that we have to slow down so that the work begun in us can take root and grow instead of being blown away by the wind that races along as we tear down the highway at 90 miles an hour.

Another word for this slowing down is Sabbath. It is remembering that we are human BEINGS, not human DOINGS. Taking time to allow God's Spirit to have a place in us is not idleness. It is taking the commandments of God seriously. "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy" is on the same list of 10 along with do not kill, lie, or steal. Slowing down for Sabbath rest means paying more attention to the

inner life of prayer, reading the Bible and making time for the Spiritual fellowship of the Church.

It is a question of obedience and our desire to do that which pleases God. Are we going to make the 4th child's response to the call to work in the fields? Perhaps we've already responded at one time or another with the attitudes and actions of the other 3. Maybe we've said "yes, I'll go", numerous times before, but each time something has gotten in the way. Perhaps we've said: "No way I'll work in those fields", only to find that our conscience will not give us rest until we do. Maybe our attitude toward our Christian vocation is filled with complaining and grumbling.

But, what about our attitude toward God's call to step away from the fray and rest and renew our spirits?

Today God is reminding us that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. Today we have the opportunity to respond like the 4th child - like Christ.

We can say "Here I am, send Me!" when the call is to willing service. And we can say the same when the call is to rest and Sabbath renewal. And we can do so with humble obedience and willing hearts as we follow in the path of our Lord and Savior.

May God strengthen us and show us how to live lives that are pleasing in God's sight. Amen.