

Read Philippians 4:1-3.

A couple of weeks ago, we had my sister-in-law and our three nieces come over to watch the boys for a few hours while I was taking a class and Danny was at work—and then we spent the afternoon together. And part of that time together involved watching a movie called ‘The Sheep Detectives.’

If you haven’t seen it—or haven’t tapped into your inner child recently—it’s a very cute film, albeit a little sad and dramatic. The movie takes place in a quaint little village on the English countryside; and the premise of the story is that there is a shepherd named George who takes care of his flock and reads them murder mystery stories every night before bed. And so these sheep—unbeknownst to him—became well-versed in the ways of solving murders.

Well, one morning they wake up to discover that their beloved Shepherd has been murdered. And a couple of these sheep take it upon themselves to figure out the mystery of who killed him.

And so three of the sheep decide to leave the protection of their pasture and walk through the town looking for evidence to help them put some pieces together. Two rams, Mopple and Sebastian, and an ewe named Lily. And only one of them—Sebastian—has ever been into the town before, so he has to explain what everything is, including the church.

So as these three sheep are walking through the church courtyard, Lily looks around and asks, “What is this?” And Sebastian responds, “This is the church where someone named God lives.”

“Who’s God?” Lily asks. “It’s a bit confusing,” he says. “God is a Shepherd.”

“So he could be *our* Shepherd?” asks Mopple. “No,” says Sebastian, “because He’s also a lamb.”

“What?” says Lily. “And He’s also invisible,” says Sebastian. “And He’s made of bread. And He damns things.”

“Damns things,” says Lily. “Like a beaver?” “Yes,” says Sebastian. “So God is a big invisible lamb-beaver made of bread?” she asks. “Yes,” he responds, “and they eat him on Sundays.”

“Poor God,” says Mopple.

And in watching that scene, I was reminded again of how wonderful it is that the Bible uses sheep to refer to God’s people. Because oftentimes, I think, *we* don’t even fully grasp the language that we’re using to speak about God—let alone how strange it might be for someone else. Sometimes the ways of God and the terms that we use in the church can be confusing. And similarly when we read Scripture, the ways that the Biblical writers were inspired to say one-thing-or-another can also seem strange.

I could imagine that if someone were to read just these three verses here in chapter 4, they might walk away thinking that Paul can't make up his mind. Because he expresses deep love for this church, in an almost embarrassing kind of way; but then in the same breath he publicly humiliates two influential women in the community. That's not very loving.

But if we spend some time here and not make assumptions too quickly, we'll see that there is in fact a unity of thought—a one-mindedness—in these verses that demonstrates the very heart of Christ.

Paul begins here by stating that he loves and longs for this community. And he's used that phrasing already twice in this letter. It's language that he often uses in his letters to speak of the longing that he and the other apostles and churches have for one another.

1:8 – “*God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.*”

2:26 – “*For he [Epaphroditus] longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill.*”

For those of you who have family that live far away, you understand this. You might even use similar language; that you find yourself *longing* for them. You ‘miss them’ is maybe the more colloquial way of saying it. You have an ache to be with them. Paul has that with this church.

But not just that. He also calls them his “joy and crown,” which for Paul was a way of speaking about their maturity as believers. They had brought him joy *because of* their progress in the faith. He's just so stinking proud of this church, they're like a crown for him. A sign of victory in Jesus. It sounds superfluous; but it's how he feels.

So then, *because of this*, because he has seen so much progression and joy in this church, his expectations are such that he can reiterate over and over *what they are capable of* in the Spirit.

Earlier—we saw this last week—he said to them, “*All of us who are mature* [in other words, we're all mature here] *should take such a view of things.*” What is that view? That we're all pressing on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of us. We're straining toward what is ahead, toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Our minds are not set on earthly things, Paul said, but on Christ. We desire to have the mind of Christ. To be citizens, not of this world or any particular city or place, but of heaven. To be citizens of God's Kingdom.

So “*stand firm in the Lord in this way*,” he says in verse 1, which is familiar language by this point in the letter. “*Stand firm in the one Spirit*,” he said back in chapter 1. “*Hold firmly to the word of life*,” he said back in chapter 2.

And he won't stop saying it. He won't stop repeating himself—as he's already told us—because it's a safeguard for them against falling into confusion. He's not embarrassed to use the same language over and over, because it reminds them, it shapes them, it forms them. It's a good reminder, actually, that repetition is not a bad thing.

And twice here in verse one Paul uses a wonderful term of endearment. It's the word *agapētoi*, which some of you well-versed in Greek might recognize as connected to the root word, *agape*. This word, although translated in the NIV the first time as 'whom I love' and the second time as 'dear friends,' is really better rendered as 'beloved' or 'my loved ones.' It's the exact same word used twice.

So if we were to read it as a straight translation, it would say, "*Therefore my brothers and sisters, my loved ones and longed for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my loved ones.*" It sounds repetitive—which our translators seem to be uncomfortable with. But Paul clearly wasn't bothered about it.

Because it's a powerful word. It's the same word—actually—that the Father spoke over Jesus at his baptism: "*This is my beloved Son...*" (Matt. 3:17) "This is the Son whom I love." And Paul uses this word multiple times in his letters—to the church in Rome, the church in Corinth, and now also here to the church at Philippi—as a reminder of *who they are* and *whose* they are.

You are the beloved children of God, siblings of Christ Jesus, adopted by the Father, and co-heirs with Christ. Don't ever forget that.

So then why, after such a loving and affectionate statement, does Paul jump immediately into a reprimand, a public rebuke of these women? For goodness' sake, Paul—write a private note to them. Don't put it in a public letter and make it awkward for everyone.

Kind of like with the sheep in the church courtyard, we almost want to say to Paul, "No, no, hold on. They won't understand if you say it like that. It's confusing. Just make sure they know that God is a loving Shepherd, and that's good enough. We can deal with the other stuff later."

Why does Paul choose *this moment* to address this conflictual situation between these two women? If these people are *so important* to him, why does he make it uncomfortable and call them out so publicly? Because we have to realize, Paul doesn't do this very often; so there *is* something interesting going on here.

What's the situation? Well, it seems to be the case that there are two women of some influence in the church—Euodia and Syntyche (Gentiles)—who are not of the same mind about something. But Paul says that they have previously contended as his side in the cause of gospel, along with Clement and the rest of his co-workers, or fellow labourers, which means that they weren't just anybody.

Because who else was called a fellow worker of Paul? If we look at his letters, he highlights a number of people who fall into that category. Priscilla and Aquila. Apollos. Timothy. Titus. He just used this term back in chapter 2 for Epaphroditus. Philemon. And a handful of others who seem to serve with him in the work of spreading the gospel and connecting the churches together.

These women are numbered among them, in some capacity. They have a public face of some kind. They have influence. They're co-workers who have also perhaps risked their lives for the sake of the gospel, like Epaphroditus had.

And so then, *how they behave*—or how they conduct themselves—is of some importance for the witness of the gospel.

Again, this is a very public conversation because this letter would have been read out loud in the church assembly. And for us, because of our social media infested culture where we regularly see people publicly lambasted, we might cringe at the idea of this and think it entirely inappropriate and shaming.

But he's doing this for two reasons. First, because to mention them by name was actually a sign of respect. In Greco-Roman culture, if you were to rebuke someone via a letter and *not* mention their name, it was actually more dishonoring to them. It brought more shame to *not* say their names. So what seems harsh to us is actually Paul showing honor to these women. He's highlighting just how important and respected they actually are.

And then second, he's addressing this situation *because of* and *in light of* what he's just told them about who they are. *They are the beloved*—the loved ones of God. So the foundation for this rebuke is completely different than the patterns that we typically see in our cancel-culture society.

It is *because* Paul loves these women so much that he can call them out in public. Because he's essentially saying to these women, "You have been my co-workers in the gospel because of how deeply you have sought to stand firm in the way of Christ. Don't give up on that. Don't lose sight of that. Don't let your pride get in the way of you seeing one another this way. Because the stakes are too high. What is lost when we bicker out of a place of our own pride is too great a cost."

Right now, according to news reports, there's just over 850 wildfires burning in Canada. And it's of course having a massive impact on the surrounding areas—Ontario in particular and then down into the United States—where clouds of smoke are resulting in horrific air quality. Many are struggling and being encouraged to stay indoors because of it.

And on a smaller scale, it's a metaphor for what can happen when we let bitterness or bickering enter into the church community. The air that we're breathing becomes toxic. We think that a little spat is just an ember that doesn't impact anyone—but it ends up affecting the 'air quality' for *everyone*.

Think about it this way. We love one another because God first loved us, right? And we are tasked with reminding one another—over and over—that we are the beloved children of God, yes?

So then, shouldn't we be equally concerned to call out one another *if* our behaviour or attitude towards one another *doesn't reflect* that belovedness? Would that not make sense that this would matter to us? That this should be a big deal for us?

Because again, look at the way that Paul handles this. "*Help these women*," he says. In other words, don't chastise them. Don't belittle them or patronize them. Don't oust them from their positions of influence. *Help them*. Help them to see their blind spots.

And does that not just exude the posture of Jesus Christ? The gentleness, the meekness, of our kind Shepherd, Jesus?

I'm often reminded of the moment when Jesus calls Matthew—the tax collector—to be his disciple. What a moment that must have been for Matthew, who no doubt would have been expecting Jesus to immediately give him a lecture on how he's been a traitor to his people and needs to repent of all his misgivings before he can follow Jesus.

But Jesus does no such thing. At least, not based on what the gospel writers tell us. He simply says to Matthew, "Follow me." And the implication is that Matthew will gradually come to grips with his own mistakes *while being in relationship with* Jesus.

So yes, Paul's saying to Euodia and Syntyche here: you are in the wrong. He's not beating around the bush here. He's already spent the whole letter leading up to this moment. Be of one mind in the Spirit. In your relationship with one another, have the same mindset as Christ. Do everything without grumbling or arguing.

I mean, by this point in the letter, Euodia and Syntyche must have known that this was coming. You *are in* the wrong, he says to them. So let us help you. Let's walk this out together and let the Spirit of Jesus minister to all of us in it.

Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen once said that "real care means the willingness to help each other in making our brokenness into the gateway to joy." This is what Paul's doing. It's why he says in the very next verse: "*Let your gentleness be evident to all.*" He's coaching them on how to do this.

Why? Why be so intentional about this? Because we are the 'loved ones' of God. And when you are the beloved, and you see me as the beloved, we don't try to turn one another into what *we* want each other to be. We create sacred space to be ourselves *while yet* seeking to stand firm in the way of Christ. To be iron sharpening iron.

Remember, Paul didn't take a side in the conversation and didn't even say what the real issue was. So we're all left to wonder, "What were they actually fighting about? How bad was it? Were they both in the wrong, or was one more at fault than the other? Who was all impacted? Did everyone know about this? Was it a scandal? Was it a leadership failure? Was it an integrity issue?"

We don't know. We want the scoop on all the drama, but Paul intentionally left it out.

Because it doesn't matter. The specifics don't actually matter. Because what mattered was that these women needed to be reminded of who *and whose* they were.

And in three verses, we're reminded of our own inclination to want to avoid awkward conversations or shove things to the side for the sake of civility—all the while *missing out* on an opportunity to test the Spirit's capabilities and see if it's actually possible to resolve every division in Christ.

What ultimately matters is that in *every* situation—as Paul said earlier—Christ is preached. What matters is that we take on the mindset of Christ together, and practice humility in Him. What matters is that we conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel, as citizens of the Kingdom of heaven.

What matters is that we take on the gentleness and lowliness of the Shepherd-King who did in fact become a Lamb, and who died for us so that we might be called children of God.