

Interdependence Day  
Philippians 4: 1 - 13  
First United Church of Christ, Northfield, MN (Valley Grove Sunday)  
July 4, 2021  
Rev. Wendy Vander Hart

May God still speak through these words of scripture and sermon.

The year was 1996. It was clear in the preceding year that the golf bug had bitten me firmly and for life. In order to better enjoy the experience, I went to golf school on Cape Cod. It was three glorious days playing 54 holes of golf, receiving six hours of instruction and working on a game for a lifetime. Part of the teaching technique included being videotaped. With golf wizard technology the instructor, Patrick, checked my swing plane, my posture and the position of my feet. I seemed to have everything just right, except my follow through. After watching a few slow-motion frames of my swing my instructor said to me - "I don't often compliment people, but you know Wendy, you could play this game."

"You could play this game." Wow! Those words have stayed with me still. I have not lived up to those words in the way he may have intended them or as my un-reached visions of the Futures Tour for the LPGA have played out. But as an instance of encouragement, it has been invaluable. If you play golf, or if you live life for that matter, you know what a difference a word of encouragement can make. The message taken to heart inspires. "You could play this game."

I imagine this phrase carrying over into other corners of life... You can parent this child. You can manage this disease. You can tackle this problem head on. You can work it out with your colleague. You can make it through this transition. You can have faith.

When I think about my golf instructor's declaration – you can play this game, I hear echoes of these encouraging words in the 13<sup>th</sup> verse of this letter to the church at Philippi- I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Lest it seem that this verse is a substitute for the power of positive thinking let's remember the key phrase of this verse. It is not, "I can do." It is not, "all things." IT IS "through Christ who strengthens me." Without the "through Christ" we would only be keyed into our efforts.

For years I heard this verse as encouraging words for an individual. I was in good company with those star athletes who add the letters Phil 4:13 on the blackout underneath their eyes who sought to enhance their personal accomplishments with these pep words. There is power in these words for each of us individually and I would never deny my father-in-law the encouragement he received being taught this as a ten-finger prayer in the midst of grief and a struggle with physical ailments. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" has its place in our faith practices.

Like just about anything in the Bible however, such inspiring words are rarely for individuals alone. In fact, all the themes in this summary chapter of the letter to the Philippians are written for a community of people.

If you were to sit down and read this whole letter written by the apostle Paul to real people in a church that he helped start in Philippi and who in partnership sent money and prayers to other churches, you would find at least three themes – gratitude, joy and encouragement. Evidently encouragement was needed because there was conflict in the church and among women leaders no less! It should not be lost

on us that the leadership of women is lifted up here as essential to the vibrancy of the church. Paul entreats them to get along for the common good!

In a super helpful commentary on this text, professor Ekaputra Tupamahu writes<sup>1</sup>, “We do not know the exact nature of their conflict. Maybe there is no conflict at all, just different views, different positions. Difference is a fact of life. Some people are predisposed to say yes, some to say no! Perhaps if we were able to ask Syntyche and Euodia, they might have told a different story than the one Paul narrates. Paul’s is a one-sided story. Nonetheless, what Paul said about them (or to them) is worth pondering in our socio-political context today.”

To remind us, Paul writes, I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help (*syllambanou*) these women, for they have struggled (*synethlesan*) beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers (*synergon*), whose names are in the book of life. (Philippians 4:2–3)

Professor Tupamahu continues, “In spite of their differences, Paul here encourages them to “be of the same mind in the Lord.” What does this mean? The Greek expression is literally translated as “I encourage you to think the [same] thing.” Here Paul is reminding Syntyche and Euodia that of course they have differences, but that it is also important to remember their togetherness, their collectiveness, what they have in common. Their differences should not hinder them from working together for the common good.

If we were able to read Greek, we would see the three times Paul uses compound words that begin with *syn-* (together) in this text (*syllambanou*, *synethlesan*, *synergon*). It is even in the name Syntyche! This sense of togetherness is a way of life rather than a system of thought. It refers to an attitude that welcomes and works with others... It is no surprise, therefore, that when Paul speaks of rejoicing or gentleness in verses 4-5, he uses a plural expression—of doing these things together- a collective rejoicing, a communal feeling of gladness... So, rejoicing in this text refers not to a personal state of being, but to a communal atmosphere of joyfully embracing difference. Instead of turning differences into an ugly exclusionary fight, differences are to be welcomed in a joyful way.”

Fast forward to our context today and we hear how these words of Paul can not only help a community be a community, but a nation be a nation. Renee Loth wrote powerfully about this in an editorial entitled “The Trouble with Independence” in the Boston Globe<sup>2</sup>. She laments that we have taken individualism too far and that “a radical autonomy has turned America into a country with less pluribus and more unum, with fewer bridges and more ramparts.” Noting the way the pandemic has driven us apart in isolation she worries that “if we forget how much we need each other, we all lose.”

Carrying it one step further she notes studies that show that Americans by large majorities believe we are masters of our own fates. She decries that this leads to conclusions that success is earned, so failure and poverty must be as well. She further notes the often-unspoken views that if poverty is deserved it is not the responsibility of the more successful to fix that, which in turn undergirds policy choices that create wide gulfs of income inequality. In a self-reliant culture, meaning and responsibility reside with the individual rather than the group and this leads, Loth writes, to a growing detachment from communitarian institutions. She invites, “we need some more humility, acknowledging how much we depend on each other to build our roads, teach our children and heal our wounds.” In short, there is nothing inherently wrong with dependence!

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<sup>1</sup> Ekaputra Tupamahu, Commentary on Philippians 4: 1-9, [Working Preacher](#), 2020

<sup>2</sup> Renee Loth, [The Trouble with Independence](#), Boston Globe, July 2, 2021.

What if, in any circumstance, our first thought was about the collective rather than our individual self?

I believe this is the greatest teaching of Jesus- to re-orient us away from our natural primacy of the individual and independence and move us toward the collective and interdependence. Maybe our celebration today of July 4 should be Interdependence Day!

Paul's words written to a church that no longer exists resonate in our time today- there is still reason to be encouraged, and of the same mind, to rejoice together, see our differences as strengths and be grateful. We Can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. When we do, we are invested in the whole and not just our individual enterprise and this is pleasing in the sight of God. May it be so. Amen.