

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE



I BELIEVE IN THE NOT SO
HOLY LOCAL CHURCH


"I beseech Euodia, and I beseech Syntyche,
that they be of the same mind in the Lord."
(Phil. 4:2)

Dr. Ernest T. Campbell



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"I beseech Euodia, and I beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord." The acid test of a great idea is its ability to go local. Abstractions make less demands upon us than concrete life experiences. It's easier to believe in civil rights than it is to work with a committee established to promote civil rights. It's easier to believe in motherhood than it is to be a mother in the home. It's easier to believe in justice than it is to serve on a jury. It's easier to believe in theological education than it is to be a member of a seminary faculty. It's easier to believe in the holy Catholic Church than it is to belong to a not so holy local church.

St. Paul stands at the top of the list of all-time influential Christians, because he went to such painful lengths to tie the gospel to particular places and specific situations. Oh, he had the larger view all right! No one ever out-visioned him on the stature of Christ, the invincibility of divine love, the primacy of faith, the mystery of the church.

His writings scaled the heights. "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels" "who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" "Therefore being justified by faith we have peace with God. . . ." "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has made you free."

But his letters are also peppered with the names of the obscure, people like Urbanus, Nympha, Archippus, Quartus, Erastus, Onesiphorous, Claudia; and those two names that appear in our text -- "I beseech Euodia, and I beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord."

Who were Euodia and Syntyche anyway? They were charter members of the Christian Church in Philippi. It is likely that they made their homes available for gatherings of the congregation there. Their work and witness were very much appreciated by the apostle. Speaking of them he writes, "They have labored side by side with me in the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life." (Phil. 4:3)

But Euodia and Syntyche had had a falling out. What it was that gave rise to this tiff and the exact nature of the quarrel are not known to us. Suffice it that the facts were known to those who read the letter. What happened between them was not very serious by worldly standards, but within the church, especially so fine a church as the church at Philippi, it was a flaw that cried for immediate correction. However noble, however exciting, however revolutionary our gospel, it can be seriously depreciated when the people of God are divided.

And so St. Paul bends to the task of exhorting Euodia and Syntyche to make up. He urges one of his most dependable colleagues, referred to in the letter as "true yokefellow," to do his utmost to bring these women together.

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The local congregation is the basic unit of the Christian enterprise. Within the local congregation we learn together, grow together, work together, rejoice and suffer together. To the question, "The local church, who needs it?" the answer is: "We all do."

The New Testament knows nothing of Christians at-large, or Christians in isolation. There's irony in an incident that Shailer Mathews reports in his book The Church and the Christian: "I remember once, as I was traveling down the Wady Kelt, which lies between Jerusalem and Jericho, I asked my guide what the collection of shacks up on the side of the hill might be. 'That,' he said, 'is a colony of hermits.'" 1

The local congregation is the basic unit of the Christian enterprise. But let us not be slow to acknowledge that it is the local church that frequently offends us. It is such an effort to relate, blend in, put up with, wait for. C. S. Lewis senses the heart of the matter in his well-known Screwtape Letters when he has the devil steady Wormwood, who feared that he would lose his client because the man was going to church, by saying: "When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands, and one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print. When he gets to his pew and looks round him he sees just that selection of his neighbours whom he has hitherto avoided." 2

At times the pettiness, the impurity and even the heresy of the local church generates in us the urge to purge. We'd like to see the church cleaned out so that more of the right people -- which is to say, more people like us -- could make up its constituency. I can understand the feelings expressed by Dr. Francis E. McMahan, former President of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, who openly lamented the neo-modernism creeping into Roman theology. In a speech in Chicago he said: "We say to the immanent apostates, get out. You are sowing confusion among the faithful, you are thereby weakening the faith of many, and you are seriously crippling the work of God." 3

Every year in my ministry, wherever I have been, I have toyed with the wish to declare the roll of that congregation dead, making it necessary for those who really meant business with God to join again in a fresh act of faith. Surely this would guarantee a pure and dynamic church. But Paul was there at the beginnings in Corinth and Philippi and Ephesus, and it wasn't long before the mix of wheat and chaff set in.

John Calvin had it right when he said: "It belongs to God alone now to know them that are his, (2 Tim ii. 19,) and to separate at least the lambs from the kids, but it is our

part to reckon in charity all to be lambs who in a spirit of obedience submit themselves to Christ as their shepherd, who betake themselves to his fold and remain there constantly. It is our part to set so high a value upon the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which he confers peculiarly on his elect, that they shall be to us as the seals, as it were, of an election which is hid from us." 4 Travel the whole world round, cover its length and breadth, and you will never find a perfect local church. "I beseech Euodia, and I beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord."

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As we prepare to draw near to the table of our Lord in the celebration of Holy Communion I should like us to be aware that though we be many in number, though we be blessed with a spacious and handsome edifice, though we are heirs of a unique and illustrious history, Riverside is still essentially a local church. We have a street address and a zip code, a telephone number and a constituency of ordinary people. Our power does not derive from any of our endowments, or the scope and beauty of our facilities. Our power derives from our unity in the Lord, our ability to gather with durable loyalty around a common purpose. And all because we have been warmed by a love that goes out in equal measure to each one.

We need the ability to say we instead of I. To say us instead of them. I am not suggesting that we ought to enthrone passivity as the primary virtue of the church. If all the church sextons in America should decide to write their memoirs, what interesting reading it would be. I recall hearing of a sexton in a small church who was forever being asked by this member and that member, not to mention the minister, to do one odd job after another. The man seemed to be virtually unflappable and always composed. When asked what his secret was he replied, "I just put my feelings into neutral and let people push me where they want."

It isn't this that I am enjoining upon us. We are not a congregation of clods, thank God. We are a vigorous peo-

ple and we are here in the yeastiest of times. I am suggesting that we ought to learn how to contend with each other in the Lord. Rather than expect the church to be a fellowship free of controversy, we should demonstrate to the world how to strive for what we believe in in love. The world needs a model, a demonstration point, where differences can be presented, heard and hopefully, in time, composed. In all of our discussions and deliberations on such crucial issues as the program, the direction, the policies and financing of this church, let us not lose sight of the figure in the carpet whose name we bear.

"I beseech Euodia, and I beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord." Learn to cherish the unity of the church. It is without question the most valuable asset we have. In an activist age it is well to keep in mind that what we are as a congregation matters every bit as much as what we do.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Mathews, Shailer, The Church and the Christian, p. 144, The Macmillan Co., New York, 1938
2. Lewis, C. S., The Screwtape Letters, pp. 15-16, Fontana Books, 1955
3. McMahan, Francis, "The New York Times," December 29, 1969
4. Calvin, John, Commentary on Philippians, p. 115 William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1957

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