

To start my homily today I would like to do word association with you. When I say the word church what is the first word or image that comes to your mind? If you take a look around this congregation you can imagine how varied the responses might be. Some might think spiritual home, others a building or holy place; Some may think an institution to which people belong. Sadly some might conjure up the word painful, hierarchical or oppressive. Still others might have a blank stare.

The apostle Paul tries to define it in his letter to the Philippians. He spent a large amount of his ministry helping people define what church meant for them. He founded many faith communities in the middle of the first century. One of them was the community of Phillipi in Greece. Paul cared for this community. You cannot read Paul's letter without getting a sense of the deep affection that he held for them and that they held for him. The Philippians loved this old apostle.

In his letter Paul invites these new Christians to discover the joy and blessing that comes with being a faith community. He encourages them to share life with one another as they honored the presence of Christ in their midst.

Going back to our word association game for a minute, I have selected six words out of his letter and I want you to close your eyes and meditate on each of these words as I speak them:

Encouragement.....Love.....participation.....

Compassion.....mercy.....joy.

Okay, you can open your eyes. These six words breathe life into the common gathering of the faithful much the way the winds of Pentecost gave birth to the church.

These words indicate the presence of a deep well of empathy and caring among the Christians in Phillipi. Encouragement flows from one person to another as consolation and then consolation flows back as encouragement. Love is impossible without sharing and mercy is hollow without compassion.

Any community that lives in an atmosphere of these six will find it difficult to know strife, envy, small mindedness, and division. It might be good for us to display these words around our worship space or internally set them in our hearts so we will not forget these bedrock realities in our pursuit of Christ.

Paul then continues in his letter” Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.”

As we come together under this roof and around this altar we should remember three things:

One: God loves every person that we meet and know, those we like and those we do not like; When we honor another person’s humanity, we honor God.

Two: We should work hard at offering encouragement and compassion; we should give consideration to the needs of others over our own needs. We will fuel joy-making in our life as a community when we make God’s love tangible and personal to others.

Finally number Three: we are called to practice generosity daily.

All of us have more to give than we realize. We have more love;

more understanding, more compassion, more money and more

grace. These gifts given generously are what fills our faith

communities with joy. Paul believes we can accomplish this, let's

make it our goal to believe it with him.