

## **Philippians 2:1-13**

“Be of the same mind,” Paul tells the Philippians, “having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” We haven’t even gotten to the troubling part about in humility regarding others as better than yourself, but I’m already worried. “Be of the same mind” sounds A) impossible, and B) sort of Stepford Wivesish. But let’s take a step back and think about the passage as a whole.

As I’ve said, Paul writes from prison. He’s very fond of the Philippians, feels their love even while he’s in prison, and counts on them thriving. These are instructions to the community, not to individuals, for continuing to thrive. So I read this passage as sort of addressed to the hive mind of the Philippians, collective advice rather than advice to each individual member, if that makes sense. And in fact, let’s think about the hive mind for a minute, because it is strangely glorious.

There’s a way in which individuals can get into a kind of rhythm with each other, such that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It’s a little like jumping rope, where each player, before jumping in, actually gestures with their hands in rhythm with the rope in order to jump in at just the right moment. It’s probably what it’s like to play jazz; that I wouldn’t know. Actually I encountered a version of the hive mind riffing on a recent Twitter thread, and I’ll share it in an attempt to convey a sense of how people got in sync with each other.

This thread started out as a simple feel-good post:

a reminder that the Internet is good sometimes: my dad lost his wedding ring in a pond near his house. i posted in a metal detector enthusiast group on FB and there are like ten dudes with beards volunteering to help him find it, apparently they do it all the time. so nice

There are a few affirming posts, including this one: “Bearded dudes with metal detectors are like rednecks with winches. It makes their whole year when they have an excuse to be useful with them.”

A few related stories: someone once lost her ring down the sink in a bar, but her friend’s uncle was a plumber so her friend unscrewed the pipe and they got three rings out. Someone else’s grandpa in the Netherlands buried a jar of jewelry for Jewish friends in 1942. In 1945 a Canadian soldier with a metal detector helped him get it out. The stories pile up, metal detectorists are extolled. Inevitably *The Lord of the Rings* is brought up. It just goes on, a collective story unspooling, with side jokes and people kindly explaining the side jokes to laggards. And this, my friends, is why I’m on Twitter. That and the classics jokes.

It’s nothing extraordinary, until you think about how all these people don’t know each other, but have in common the experience of losing something and being helped to find it. And clearly they contribute their two cents’ worth because of the pleasure of sharing the experience, which is then enriched by additional shared experiences like *The Lord of the Rings*. They just very naturally became a community for a moment.

That’s what I think Paul is speaking to:

<sup>3</sup>Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

He’s setting the tone of the hive mind. It’s not that they should all agree about everything, but that they should have the same orientation—the orientation not of making yourself less than you are, but of optimizing everyone. It’s like something Ruth Simmons says: the president of a historically black college in Texas, she points out that one common model of higher education is to eliminate less qualified students so that only the highest-achieving finish. The other, she

says, which HBCUs have followed, is to make sure everybody gets through. You don't under-achieve, but you look around to see who needs support. Paul is saying that Christians should look around to see how to get everybody through.

He then goes into the famous Christ hymn, which may be one of the oldest pieces of Christian theology that we have. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who (didn't grasp onto divine privilege but) emptied himself, took on human life, and submitted to death on a cross." Empty yourself of ego anxiety, says Paul. And Christ's self-emptying was validated by God who then exalted him—meaning that we bow down at the name of Jesus, we glorify God, *because* Jesus divested himself of power and lived like us. Paul says, Get past yourself, and the things that protect you, and truly understand what it's like not to have protection, *then* you're imitating Christ. Be human together. Look at others and think, "That person is one of my people."

But we do this *together*. H. Richard Niebuhr said that there are three ways of looking at the world—three kinds of hive mind, if you will.<sup>i</sup> he argues that each of these ways of seeing reality is correlated with a way of responding to reality or responding to life. So what's at stake in these three ways of seeing is how we will live our lives. The first way is to see the whole as threatening and hostile. We're all going to die, everyone we love will die and be swallowed into the pit of nothingness. Nothing is certain but death and taxes. So if that's how you see reality, you'll try to protect yourself as much as possible. Christians who see reality this way see God as dangerous, watching to catch us believing the wrong things or having impure thoughts. The only way to survive is to do everything right.

The second way to see reality is as indifferent. The universe isn't our friend, and it isn't

our enemy; it just is. So you don't have to feel desperate and build up systems to keep yourself safe, but you certainly should enjoy what you can and protect yourself from the perils that can be easily prevented.

The third option is to see reality as life-giving, nourishing of human life—gracious. And that's the position that Niebuhr advocates. He acknowledges evil, and all the atrocious things that human beings are capable of doing to each other. But he says that even in the midst of atrocity, if we see the universe as gracious and life-giving in ways that we don't understand, it makes possible a different response to life. It's a response of gratitude, but also a response of not needing to be primarily concerned about defending the self against a hostile or indifferent reality. It makes possible "the self-forgetfulness of faith," the self-emptying that Paul refers to, that Jesus modeled, a willingness to spend and be spent. And although it's not impossible for heroic individuals to do this, it's more natural to do it in community, where you have people in sync, riffing with each other about how to reach out with love and delight.

Steve Kerr, the coach for the Golden State Warriors, spoke for so many of us last week when he gave over his press conference to outrage and grief for the families in Uvalde Texas who lost their precious children to a mass shooter. He said, in part:

"There's 50 senators, right now, who refuse to vote on HR-8, which is a background check rule that the House passed a couple years ago. It's been sitting there for two years. There's a reason they won't vote on it: to hold onto power.

"I ask you, Mitch McConnell, and ask all of you Senators who refuse to do anything about the violence, the school shootings, the supermarket shootings, I ask you: 'are you going to put your own desire for power ahead of the lives of our children, our elderly, and our churchgoers?' Because that's what it looks like."<sup>ii</sup>

The callousness and cynicism of those Republican politicians can only be explained by a

sense of the universe being hostile or at best indifferent. They think they have to make these monstrous moral compromises in order for their lives to be worth living. Apparently they cannot imagine that life could be rich and rewarding if they lost their seats in the Senate, or lost campaign funding, or lost the goodwill of other powerful party members. They may go to the Prayer Breakfast, but they show no evidence of faith in the way they live their lives.

That gunman did unspeakable damage, abetted by our society's lunatic failure to regulate firearms. It looks like law enforcement bungled badly too. But that does not mean that the universe *is* hostile or indifferent. Look at the pushback from Beto O'Rourke at Gov. Abbot's press conference. Look at the two funeral homes in Uvalde that are going to provide their services for free. The League of United Latin American Citizens is one of several organizations that has set up funds for victims and survivors; I've put a link to a list of ways to help on our website. Way more people feel connected to those children and their families than don't, because that's how we're built. God who is love made us connected to each other. The way to abundant life is to align ourselves with God's intention that we be *for* each other.

I wanted to close with a quotation from the Black historian Jemar Tisby, because I was going to talk about racism as evidence of seeing the universe as hostile. I had to re-write because of this appalling atrocity, but I still want you to hear what he said. He's talking about racism, but it works for every kind of violence:

Courageous Christianity does not compromise with racism, it confronts it. Courageous Christianity does not fear human beings, it fears God and acts accordingly. Courageous Christianity is willing to lose funding and donations to stand for the dignity of all people.

...

If you take a stand for racial justice and reject this report, I cannot promise you more money or more students. I cannot say that you will not suffer setbacks and lose standing with certain people.

I can promise that as you pursue justice you will get more of Jesus.

The promise of Jesus' presence is made real in times of persecution. Taking a stand for racial justice and protecting the most vulnerable among you may seem like walking through "the valley of the shadow of death" right now (Psalm 23:4). But in that shadow you will see the light of Christ. <sup>iii</sup>

God of love,

With praise we celebrate Jesus, who humbled himself so that every knee should bend and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. May we see your world generously and without fear, full of promise, a place to love. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://ftw.usatoday.com/2022/05/warriors-steve-kerr-speech-ualde-texas-school-shooting>

<sup>iii</sup> [https://jemartisby.substack.com/p/an-open-letter-to-the-board-of-trustees?r=dfab0&utm\\_medium=ios&s=r#details](https://jemartisby.substack.com/p/an-open-letter-to-the-board-of-trustees?r=dfab0&utm_medium=ios&s=r#details)