

Is God At Work in Us? Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32; Psalm 25:1-9; 9-25-2011

It seems there are times in life when we all need a reality check. These times vary for each of us. We might have gone merrily on our way, insisting on our own way for a long time, until we are stopped in our tracks by someone who offers a different way. Or, we might think we have the authority to speak on any and all issues and we never hold back, until we have someone tell us that we are grating on them, big time. Or, we might believe that we have the right to sit in judgment of others in all matters and that we should speak up loud and clear to tell them how they are wrong, then someone reminds us that while we are pointing our finger at them three others are pointing right back at us.

When we are reminded of what it is we have been doing that has benefitted no one but ourselves, we are sometimes taken aback, hurt and offended. If we are wise when this happens we take a step or two back and look at ourselves as objectively as possible to try and discern just how we have gone wrong. This is not easy to do and sometimes we just turn a deaf ear to those who have tried to help us and plunge on, deeper into our lives of denial.

When I have noted miscues in my life, I most often remind myself that, as a Christian, there are ways to avoid becoming "holier than thou," or upset by things that do not seem to have the proper stamp of "Alice" on them. There are ways I can reground myself in what way is the right way to pursue.

Enter our reading for this morning from the Letter to the Philippians. Paul, most likely, wrote this letter while in prison. He was especially fond of this little church and sent this cordial letter to them thank to them for a gift they had sent him and to give them some instructions. He was afraid they might be pulled apart by petty jealousies so he reminded them of the way in which they

were to live and treat one another. This reality check he sent to them is pertinent for us today.

In the verses we read he urged that small community of faith to work toward consensus in all they did without murmuring or arguing. He told them to lay aside any selfish ambition or conceit and to see others as better than themselves. He reminded them not to look to their own interests but to the interests of others. If they would follow his instructions, God would then be working in them and through them to make their little fellowship strong and successful.

This holds true for many churches today. I received an email about my home church a few days ago. I have been away for about 30 years. When I grew up there, it was a strong body of 1800 members, large for continuing Congregational churches. It has been through years of difficulty following the retirement of a long-term well-loved pastor. It seems to those of us looking from the outside in, and some who have worked there, that the leadership has been unable to decide just who they are and where they are going. There are very subtle internal struggles between groups and individuals. Often there is nothing overt, just a sense of a loss in direction. This is one of those times when having three Congregationalists in a room and four opinions is not a good thing.

The present pastor, one very good at helping churches find their way, has decided that his interim ministry has not worked the purpose he had hoped. Interim pastors analyze congregations they are called to serve, try to discover, with members of the church, what needs to be changed and then go about doing it with consensus. They try to give a church that is struggling a reality check. This has not worked. Perhaps, this week, when those gathered in the sanctuary hear the words from Philippians, they might sit up and take notice. However, if they are so entrenched in having their own way at a cost to the entire body, nothing will

be gained. It has been sad for me to see my dear old church decrease in membership from 1800 to 500 members due mostly to internal stress. It is difficult to see good people unable to work together for the interests of all. When there is no ability to work together, God is not working in or through God's people.

That is the clearest sign of trouble, when people cannot work together and when they indulge in going off in directions of their own, instead of finding the common, united way. Groups destroy themselves when they cannot get their acts together. They send out the clear message that God is not in this place and they deflect others from wanting to be with them.

Now, we all know that God is within all of us. It is up to us to reveal that presence and to reach out to make the world around us a more hospitable, caring place for others. That is what is meant by God working in us and through us. We reveal this presence in our demeanor—by the way we greet others, with gentleness and kindness; by the way we listen to the ideas of others and see how we can incorporate them into creating a better whole; by the way we show patience with one another without jumping someone who does not seem to know what our unwritten code of conduct might be. There is no place for discounting the feelings and ideas of others in a world where God is present.

When we feel ourselves slipping away from being engaged in the work of God for the good of all, we need to pause right where we are and give ourselves a reality check by recalling the teachings that are available to all of us in the pages of our Bible. When we can pull ourselves back into accord with those words we find we make ourselves better instruments of God's peace in a world that has gone topsy-turvy. Amen

