

Philippians 2:1-8

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

“When We Leave What Have We Left?”

Rev. Charles Schuster

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We had a fire drill this week, on Monday. We had a fire drill. I wasn't here when we had it. As senior minister, had I been here, my job is to get the bullhorn. The church owns a bullhorn, and to walk into the south parking lot. I've got to get some batteries for the bullhorn. And tell people where to go. I've been thinking of the different ways to leave church, because of that. I mean you could go out the south entrance by the elevator into the parking lot, but you don't want to do that this afternoon, because at four o'clock there will be monsters and ghosts and creepy things and cars with trunks and children in costume. You could go out by one of the doors by the kitchen, but not tonight, at least after five o'clock, because there will be various types of boiling brew made from unspeakable ingredients. David Dalke and I were the judges of the chili cook-off one year, and my mouth was cauterized. I couldn't taste anything for about a week.

You could go out the east door by the artwork there, with the caution tape on that door because the door jamb broke and they don't make that kind an more. Kind of pretty, that caution tape, don't you think? You could go out this door here. If you did, you'd want to turn left, because if you turn right, you're going to be in the rose garden, and that's a dead end, it doesn't... One year a mother duck laid eggs in the rose garden and when the baby ducks hatched, we had to evict them for her. If we had a fire drill, I would get the bullhorn and I would tell you how to leave church. That's my job, senior ministers get to tell people where to go.

This morning I'd like to spend some time letting you know what you'll find after you've left. Because I know what you're going to find. You may too. So my job today is to warn you. Leaving church, be prepared to face two things we need to know. First of all, leaving church. There's a world of hurt out there. Tuesday the snow hit, beginning in the evening, and Wednesday the town looked like a war zone. Still does. Trees fell. Limbs broke. I'm standing next to my neighbor on Wednesday morning. We're shaking off the snow from the branches that have Tebowed themselves in prayer. I had to get that in somewhere. And a good many of her trees are broken, and her yard looked like something exploded. My yard was comparatively unmarked. And I said to Betsy, "You could look at it this way. You won't have to rake as many leaves this year." That wasn't what she wanted to

hear. It was an observation not unlike the physician's assistant who was overheard saying to a nurse, "I can't remember exactly what she died of, but I do recall it wasn't anything serious."

There's a world of hurt out there. Bulletin board outside a church, there was a sign that read, "If you have troubles, come in and tell us about them. If you don't have troubles, come in and tell us how you do it." John White said, "Today, anything goes, and most of it goes downhill," and somewhat it does. Barbara Brown Taylor saw it. Her book *Leaving Church*, you know what it's about. She left the church. Not because she became angry with the church. She was a priest in the Episcopal church, and she got a job teaching at a local college. And this book is all about what she felt about leaving the church, and as she thought about what she left, she thought about what the church was, and it transformed her. We ought to study that book some time. "When I left church, I became a professor, not a preacher. I felt a great welling-up of tenderness for everyone. So much hurt out there." And she went on to say, "For me, one of the most profound statements in the Bible is in the Book of Jonah." Jonah, who was asked to go to the city of Ninevah, to warn the enemy people, and Jonah who didn't want to do that, got on a boat and went the other way, and you know the fish, the big fish, what they call Jonah and the whale. God said to Jonah, "Should I not be concerned about the great city?" God is concerned. So much hurt in the world.

A world of hurt out there, and something is being asked of us. Paul wrote about it in Philippians, and it's one of the kindest, most mellow letters that he wrote. "Let each of you look not only to your own interests, but to the interests of others, and have this mind among you which you have in Christ Jesus." There's a world of hurt, and if we listen carefully, we will hear it, because sometimes it's disguised. I think we can all pick this up, this son who called his mother in Florida. He lived in another state. He called his mother, asked how she was doing. She said, "I'm not doing well. I'm weak." "Why are you feeling weak, Mother?" he said. She answered, "Because I haven't eaten in 38 days." Her son was appalled. "Mother, why haven't you eaten in 38 days?" She said to him, "Because I didn't want my mouth to be filled with food when you called." Do you hear the pain? Ouch.

Read about this person who was the mayor of a city back east. She always had trouble remembering some people's names, and that's important to be able to know people's names if you're the mayor of a city. But she had this thing she would do. When she would be in a crowd for some kind of event, she would say to everyone whose name she couldn't remember, "How's your back?" Four out of five times, it worked. People have got back problems. Pain in the back. Hurt in the back. Hurt in the soul. Philo of Alexandria said, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle."

I don't really spend much time wishing I could trade my life for someone else's life. I don't. But I always thought if I could have been anyone else, it would have been Jerry West. Some of you know Jerry West, great basketball player. West Virginia University. I knew him as a kid, I was in junior high school. He was my hero. Always aspired to be six foot two and a half inches tall, and I am, when I stand up straight, because that's how tall

he is. Played basketball in high school and college and seminary at the divinity school. I ran like he ran, I shot the ball like he shot at the basket, never did quite have the result he had. Someone gave me once a basketball jersey said West Virginia University on the front and number forty-four on the back, that was his number, but the number was upside down because this person said, "You know what? You're a mirror image of Jerry West." Great basketball player for the Los Angeles Lakers. Other people admired him too because, you know what, if you look at the basketball uniforms the NBA players wear, (maybe, if they overcome their strike) that silhouette on their uniforms, that's Jerry West. He had it all. This month he wrote his autobiography, and now we learn, when he was young in what we call Cabin Crick, West Virginia, his father beat him. They had no money. His father beat him, beat his mother too. Beat his sisters. He felt unworthy, suffered with dark thoughts and depression. He wrote, "I never learned what love was. What I know is anger and sadness and a weird sort of an emptiness, and I have this crazy imagination that I never had self-confidence or allowed myself the satisfaction. It's almost as if my life is tormented." Life fell apart for that family when his older brother died in the Korean War. He suffered from depression, Jerry did. He was beaten by his father, he felt he never was good enough. There is a torture to being Jerry West, and pain and hurt. There is.

Paul wrote, "Let each of you look not only to your own interests, but to the interests of others." When we leave church, we will see it, there's a world of hurt out there. The men's Bible study that meets on Friday at the Egg & I restaurant in the morning at six o'clock, it always has seemed to me that group would be difficult to serve. I have described us as 20 grumpy old men. Friday morning the manager came in and told us that we were her favorite group. That's a stunning revelation, but thinking about it, those guys really do care about the people who serve us, and who prepare the breakfast for us, and there's this one who waits on us, and we want to know how she's doing because she's got plans to be a nurse and go back to school. They hear the hurt that's hidden. And those male chauvinist grumpy gaggle of Bible benders have been one of our church's most outstanding missionary movements, believe it or not.

There's a world of hurt out there. The quiet child who never speaks up in class has a whole lot to say, just doesn't know how to say it. The children who are going to be coming to our doors, they've got masks on their faces, scary masks. They're like every one of us. Underneath the scary mask there's a frightened child, wondering what life holds. That homeless woman who comes and wants some help, you know we may not be able to help her find shelter and food, but at least we can treat her like a human being and give her a friendly reception. The old man who seems cranky, just a frightened human being who's concerned about his future, just as much as the middle manager at Kodak who just got downsized. There's a world of hurt out there. John Wooden got it right when he said, "Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can." Greta Brook Palmer, who said "Happiness is the byproduct of an effort to make someone else happy."

We leave church, we have the mind of Christ that we will see the world of hurt. And then, we'll want to remember that there is, in that world, a world of help. We can't do it all, but you see, we don't have to. Thurgood Marshall, Supreme Court Justice, his last

speech on the court before he retired, he said, "The legal system can force open doors. It can sometimes knock down walls, but it cannot build bridges. That's the job that belongs to you and me." When we leave the church we will find, if we look for it, a world of help. James Michener wrote so many books about people and other places, fascinating books. Someone asked him why he did it. He said, "I was born to a woman I never knew. I was raised by another one who took in orphans. I do not know my background, my lineage, my biological or cultural heritage, and when I meet someone new, I treat them with absolute respect, for after all, they could be my people."

A week ago I was back home in West Virginia, and we traveled to Shanksville, Pennsylvania, to the memorial of Flight 93. This is what I saw. The final descent of the jumbo jet, as it came across the gentle hill and crashed into the edge of the woods. The marble walls with the names of the forty passengers that lined the glide path of that ill-fated airplane that was hijacked by terrorists. The crash site, off in the distance, where no one could go unless you had a key to open a gate. And only the families of those who died, those brave passengers, only the family members had the key. And five large wooden posts, allowing visitors to look between those posts to see the crash site. Five posts, cut eight times each, forty representing the forty who died. No one spoke beyond a whisper. It's sacred ground, and a testimony to the fact that ordinary citizens can take action to do what they could. That plane was 18 minutes from the White House. 18 minutes from its target, and it took the passengers, and it took the loved ones passengers on cell-phone contact, it took "We're going to do something." It took "Let's roll." As anonymous citizens became a team and they worked together and kept a bad thing from getting worse.

Sometimes we think we cannot do it alone, and then we know we don't have to. Sometimes it seems that the task is too big, the hill is too steep. But then there is a helping hand, and before long, we did what we couldn't do, and we got to the top of the hill we couldn't climb. There's a world of help out there. If we have the mind of Christ, we'll join it. See, Jesus taught us to be who we are. I wonder who taught him. When was he helped? When was help in his world that let him know what we learn from the Gospels? I can't prove this, but I'm going to say it. That story he told about the man beaten and left to die by the side of the road, about the priest who walked by on the other side, about the good Samaritan who helped the wounded soul, who bandaged up his wounds, who took him to the inn and paid for his stay till he healed, I think the man who was beaten and left to die, I think that was Jesus. I think this is an episode in his life, and I think the Samaritan taught him about compassion and caring, and I think the Samaritan taught our Christ, the mind of Christ, that he spoke of and is remembered for having said to us. There's a world of help out there.

Tom Spaulding has written a book, *It's Not Just Who You Know*, member of the church. Janet Miller gave me this book last week. I could not put it down. It's a book about how people have helped him, and it's a book about how people can help all of us. There was a teacher who believed in him. He was dyslexic. His grades were awful. There was a football coach who put him on the team as a kicker, who said to him, "I saw you as a leader. I saw you had character and tenacity, and I believed in you." He had parents who

believed in him, a father who kept saying to him, "You're changing the world, son." Spaulding has this principle, it's called the Law of Random Relationships. He says, "We cannot afford to dismiss casual encounters, because relationships are so important that even seemingly random meetings offer huge potential." Tom Spaulding is a motivational speaker, former CEO of Up With People, you know, the group. He believes that we must learn to take relationships from the transactional level to the transformational level. Every encounter is important.

I told you a few weeks ago, I got invited to meet the students at Rocky Mountain High School in a class on relationships, and the reason I did it is because I did a wedding for the daughter of somebody in the church who teaches over there, and she told this teacher what I did to her daughter and son-in-law. I was invited, and it was an interesting session, but what you may not know is I took with me a couple from our church, they're getting married in December, and I did the pre-marital session with the couple in front of the students. And then at the end of the session, I asked the couple to leave and then the students voted on whether or not this couple should be married. I'm trying to see if they're here. I don't think so, but I know that the mother and father of one of them is here. They voted unanimously that they should be. There were some issues, and we'll talk, but anyway. Now the students have written notes. One of the things that happened is, now the couple has invited those students to come to their wedding. The students have written notes to the couple and to me. I don't know what they wrote Polly and Luis, but this is what I got. Some of what I got. "Thanks for coming and talking to our class. I really enjoyed learning and learned a lot. I did ask my boyfriend some of the questions you asked, and told him if we ever get married, he's going to have to take the Ford engine out of the living room. He's a mechanic." Another student wrote, "Thank you so much for coming to our relationships class and demonstrating to us how important premarital counseling is. I know that when I get married, I will definitely make my husband attend it with me."

Those students are invested in that couple, and that couple considers their time in that classroom as important as it could be. It is one wedding voted on by twenty students to the point the wedding will be attended by young people who are invested in the marriage of two people they never met before. In the Law of Random Relationships, there's a world of help out there, and we are connected more than we know.

Four years ago, a man gave money to the church to upgrade our church library. Some time after that, we upgraded our library, and we were judged to be the best church library in the country. We got the banner up there to prove it, still. Because word got out about our library, a retired pastor, having heard that, donated over a hundred books, very rare books, to our library. He has macular degeneration and he can't read any more, so he gave us these very valuable books there in the library. It's the Mason Willis collection. Because our church has a collection of medical equipment, we have a device where you can put a book on this platform and a television screen puts the words up on the screen, and we loaned it to him. And he wrote us a letter last week. "I'm reading books with a vengeance," he writes. "You know, the first two days I didn't even want to go to bed at night. I have re-subscribed to magazines that I'd cancelled. You have helped me recover

the dimension of books once more. I am most grateful." Relationships. World of help. When we leave church we will find a world of help. There are people out there who will speak a kind word when it needs to be spoken, or who will do a kind deed when it needs to be done, and you see, once we connect with each other and begin to work together, there is no limit to what can be done.

I looked out the door of our house yesterday and there were neighbors picking up tree limbs from each other's yards. And it was Goethe who said, "Kindness is the golden chain by which society is bound together." Leaving church, a world of help out there, people whose language we may not even speak, people whose names we don't even know. Many ways to leave the church, various doors to take, and in the time of emergency, I will get the bullhorn and tell you. But if we leave, we will discover that there is a world of hurt out there and something is being asked of us, and we will also discover there's a world of help out there, and transactional relationships can become transformational, as together we can solve big problems and we will have the mind of Christ and live out social justice, and we will know it. See we, can leave the church, but the church will never leave us, because of what we learned while we were here. Let us pray.

O God, when we're not sure what is our job, open our eyes and our ears to those who hurt. And when we are overwhelmed by the size of the task, help us find help so we can join together and get it done. Amen.