

**Euodia & Syntyche – the Church of Philippi
Sermon on Philippians 4: 1-9**

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.

Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Sisters and brothers, as we all know, in Jesus' time men had the say. And in the time of the early church too.

The Roman Emperor had forced Roman structures upon all parts of the then known world. Those who liked his reign were celebrating the so-called Peace he had granted to the nations. But those who looked at the political development a bit more closely and critically could soon see that this Pax Romana, this Roman Peace was only achieved at a high price.

Oppression, hunger and poverty had come alongside with the so-called Peace. Death and dying were a cruel and frightening reality for the majority of the people living in the first century.

Women and children, and generally the poor part of the population counted for nothing and were the victims of the Roman rule.

Death was all around. Death was constantly present.

There were wars, there was violence in everyday life: rape, torture, public persecution of ethnic and religious minorities, inhumanity in the prisons, in the streets and violence all over...

Hope for the Kingdom of God, hope for an earth in which only God was king, hope for a world of freedom and self-determination, hope for equality of women and men, rich and poor was the central thought that enabled the followers of Jesus to keep going.

The expectation that God would put an end to suffering and death nourished people's hopes and dreams, and empowered them to live a life of love and peace – in spite of the harshness of their time...

The early Christians lived in a male and power dominated society. But the message Christ, and later his apostles brought to the people was a different one. We don't always see it at first glance, sometimes we have to explore and search a bit. When we look at the early Christian leadership just quickly, we see: twelve male disciples, the apostle Paul became extremely influential, and men were noted as co-workers of Paul.

Over centuries readers of the Bible presumed that the early church – struggling to survive in the male-dominated, patriarchal society of the Roman Empire - forbade or suppressed female leadership.

(Such an assumption is understandable when one reads a text like “Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says.” 1Cor 14:34: There is some debate about whether or not Paul actually wrote this particular part of 1 Corinthians. There are others who would argue that Paul was dealing with a specific problem in one church and that he was not making a universal declaration. Nevertheless, early Christian leaders like Paul sometimes appear to assent to, if not reinforce, male authority, as we find in the so-called household codes in the New Testament, where wives are encouraged to submit to their husbands (see, for example, Col 3:18-4:1).)

However, in this regard our sermon text today shows us a different world. The church in Philippi, located in present-day Greece, is unusual and perhaps illuminating. Here we seem to be a bit closer to thoughts and visions of equality, peace and justice... No appalling poverty, no oppression of women, no neglect of the poor...

But let's explore a bit and find out about this young Christian church. It all begins with Luke's report of Paul's initial missionary work in Philippi. We learn that he went to look for a “place of prayer” and stumbled across a gathering of women (Acts 16:13).

One woman named Lydia, a merchant from Thyatira, heard Paul's good news of Jesus with great joy, and she and her whole household were baptized.

While Paul's letter to the Philippians at which we look today, does not mention Lydia, Paul does refer to two other women: Euodia and Syntyche.

Paul expresses to the whole church his concern that these women are experiencing some kind of conflict and he commends both of them as women who have “struggled beside me in the work of the gospel”. The nature of their work and how they were connected to Paul is not mentioned, but certainly they were both prominent figures in the church.

The fact that Paul begins his letter by addressing “bishops and deacons” alongside the rest of the church (Phil 1:1-2) may give us a clue concerning this situation with, and the position of, Euodia and Syntyche. Were they both “bishops”, - today we might call them pastors in charge or superintendents or chair women of the district or whatever - ?

What we know for sure: these women were not only respected in this church but were commended and considered equal co-workers of the apostle.

Paul names Euodia and Syntyche in just two verses, he gives us a glimpse into the value and significance of their ministries.

“I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to think the same thing in the Lord. Indeed, I ask you, my loyal friend to help them—these women who have contended together with me in the cause of the Gospel, along with

Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.”

When he describes the ministry of Euodia and Syntyche, Paul uses a couple of the same terms he had applied previously to Timothy and Epaphroditus (ch 2:19ff). For instance, Paul writes that Euodia and Syntyche had contended together with him “in the Gospel”. Earlier in the letter, Paul had described Timothy as someone who had served with him “in the Gospel”. Furthermore, Paul goes on to refer to Euodia and Syntyche as his “co-workers“. Earlier, Paul had referred to Epaphroditus as his “co-worker”. So, according to Paul, the ministries of the women Euodia and Syntyche were comparable to the ministries of the men Timothy and Epaphroditus.

Let’s explore a bit further, and find out what a great man of the ancient church wrote about Euodia and Syntyche:

The 4th century Bishop John Chrysostom (c. 349-407) believed that Euodia and Syntyche were leading women in the Philippian church, and he compared them to Phoebe, a woman minister, in the church at Cenchrea who we come across in the letter to the Romans.

Bishop John Chrysostom wrote:

“These women, Euodia and Syntyche, seem to me to be the chiefs of the Church which was there, and Paul commends them to some notable man whom he calls his “loyal companion”; Paul commends them to him, as to a fellow-worker, and a colleague, and brother, and companion, as he does in the Epistle to the Romans, when he says, “I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a minister of the church at Cenchrea”.”

Two present time historians write about the time of Paul’s letter to the people in Philippi:

“It was not unusual for women to have leading roles in Philippi. Philippi was the chief city of Macedonia and it has been well documented that Macedonian women enjoyed greater freedoms, rights and powers than many other women of that time.

If Macedonia produced perhaps the most competent group of men the world had yet seen, the women were in all respects the men’s counterparts; they played a large part in affairs, received envoys and obtained concessions for them from their husbands, built temples, founded cities, engaged soldiers, commanded armies, held fortresses, and acted on occasion as rulers.” (W. Tarn and G.T. Griffith, *Hellenistic Civilisation*)

...sounds a bit like a hymn on women’s liberation and equality...

William Barclay, one of the most well-known writers of Bible commentaries, writes:

“We can see this freedom of women even in the narrative in Acts of Paul’s work in Macedonia. In Philippi, Paul’s first contact was with the meeting for prayer by a riverside, and he spoke to the women gathered there. Lydia was obviously a leading figure in Philippi. In Thessalonica, many of the chief women were won for Christianity, and the same thing happened at Berea. ...it is well worth remembering, when we are thinking of the place of women in the early church

and of Paul's attitude to them, that in the Macedonian churches they clearly had a leading place."

In today's text Paul urged Euodia and he urged Syntyche to, literally, "think the same thing". They were his friends and valued colleagues, influential members of the Philippian church and Paul urges them to work together.

"Think the same thing" are the key words in the letter to the Philippians. In verses preceding our text, Paul had been encouraging people to have the same thinking as himself, that of reaching out for their faith. It could be that he is saying, "I encourage Euodia and I encourage Syntyche to have the same thinking in the Lord, that of aspiring to spiritual maturity and perfection."

Bishop Chrysostom did not see any sign of a quarrel in Paul's plea to Euodia and Syntyche; he saw only praise and wrote: "Do you see how great a testimony Paul bears to their virtue?"

In the New Testament there are many examples of women who were involved in significant gospel ministry, some as leaders. Even though these women—women such as Euodia and Syntyche—are mentioned briefly, they do serve as valid, biblical role models for women in ministry today.

But this is not the only theme our Bible text offers to us.

There is this issue about the role of the women. But there is also a suggestion of how to work together, and a promise of what will happen when they all, men and women alike, think the same thing.

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

And finally there is the promise of God's peace for all of them, if they only try and succeed in living in harmony. The peace of God which surpasses all understanding...

In the Bible, the word translated as peace has rich connotations of reconciliation, wholeness, health, and unity. And even greater peace comes, when reconciliation, wholeness, health, and unity are not only experienced by individuals but in community!

"Keep on doing the good things Jesus has taught us," Paul seems to say, and there will be a life for all of us in justice, in peace, in equality and in happiness."

Oppression, inequality and poverty were real.

Death and dying were a cruel and frightening reality for the majority of the people.

Women and children, and generally the poor part of the population counted for nothing.

Death was all around. Death was constantly present... but they knew of a different world.

The liberation of women would bring along changes everywhere: politics will change, economies and education systems will change, culture, literature, poetry, books, music, arts – everything will change...

A small beginning had taken place in the faith community of Philippi.

And it would spread out and win over more and more people.

They only had to be “thinking and working on the same thing”, stick together and strengthen and encourage each other.

The letter to the church in Philippi is showing to the people then and to us now that living a life of faith is always a work in progress. Good things begin, and eventually they will spread and win.

But many aspects of life, especially of faith life cannot be rushed.

Spiritual growth is no different than physical growth; both require time and patience.

And when we experience growth it is not always easy to detect. Progress sometimes seems meagre. Change does not come along as fast as we wish it did. Perhaps that is why Christians have often been called a pilgrim people. Our lives reflect the process of God’s work more than any polished final product.

The apostle Paul invites people to see the small moments, the instant little growths and changes... He knows so well that his message is counter-cultural, in other words is not supporting the status quo of a society but calling people out to work for the significant changes which the world needs.

In that, he reminds people to be patient because the realisation of the visions we have for our life and the lives of those who live after us, will not come all at once. It takes time, and there are fall backs. Achievements can turn or disappear: the liberation of women, the fair distribution of the world’s goods, the peace we all hope for... They all take time.

They took time then, and they take time today.

We can do our very best, but we are all humans, and in many respects we remain beginners: beginners of hope, of faith, of freedom... We will probably never be perfect, but we can try to be excellent.

Paul encourages us to press on and not to give up. He emphasizes that Christian maturity is a process of cooperating with God’s presence in our lives and with the people he sends us along the way. Both, together, give us the power to lead, to think the same thing, work towards the same goal, and to be a good example to those around us.

Philippi to Paul was an exceptionally well working, just community. And he encourages them over and over again to hold together, to carry on and to never give up.

The message of the letter to the Philippians is one of patience and hope. The world has undergone many changes. It will change in the future too. And God needs us to work alongside each other in unity to make the necessary changes for God’s kingdom flourish.

Paul wants to inspire then and now. He invites us to a life in deep participation with the God who seeks to join us in our efforts to live a life of justice, peace and

equality of all human beings. God offers us his partnership and invites us to be his co-workers in a world in which we all are meant to be equal and free.

Let me express that with a woman's creed written when I was a teenager:
(Rachel Conrad Wahlberg, "Jesus and the Freed Woman" 1978)

I believe in God
who created woman and man
in God's own image
who created the world
and gave both sexes
the care of the earth.
I believe in Jesus
child of God
chosen of God
born of the woman Mary
who listened to women and liked them
who stayed in their homes
who discussed the Kingdom with them
who was followed and financed
by women disciples.
I believe in Jesus
who discussed theology
with a woman at a well
and first confided in her
his messiahship
who motivated her to go and tell
her great news to the city.
I believe in Jesus who received anointing
from a woman at Simon's house
who rebuked the men guests who scorned her
I believe in Jesus
who said this woman will be remembered
for what she did -
minister to Jesus.
I believe in Jesus
who acted boldly
to reject the blood taboo
of ancient societies
by healing the audacious woman
who touched him.
I believe in Jesus who healed
a woman on the Sabbath
and made her straight
because she was
a human being.
I believe in Jesus
who spoke of God
as a woman seeking the lost coin

as a woman who swept
seeking the lost.
I believe in Jesus
who thought of pregnancy and birth
with reverence
not as punishment - but
as wrenching event
a metaphor for transformation
born again
anguish-into-joy.
I believe in Jesus
who spoke of himself
as a mother hen
who would gather her chicks
under her wings.
I believe in Jesus who appeared
first to Mary Magdalene
who sent her with the bursting message
GO AND TELL...
I believe in the wholeness
of the Savior
in whom there is neither
Jew nor Greek
slave nor free
male nor female
for we are all one
in salvation.
I believe in the Holy Spirit
as she moves over the waters
of creation
and over the earth.
I believe in the Holy Spirit
as she yearns within us to
pray for those things
too deep for words.
I believe in the Holy Spirit
the spirit of God
who created us all equally
and gave us birth
and holds us
and guides us.

Amen.