



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

Christian in 2020

Philippians 2:1–5

By Pastor Pam Reist

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777 South Mount Joy Street
Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania 17022
717-367-1000
www.ETOWNCOB.ORG

“Hi Pam, are you sitting down?” asked the voice at the other end of the line. Of course I was, I was driving—and I did have a hands-free phone. That voice was Chris Douglas, Director of the Annual Conference Office in Elgin, IL. She was calling to ask if I would serve as preacher at the 2013 Annual Conference in Charlotte, NC. I was honored and it didn’t take long to say, Yes! It wasn’t a “normal” sermon that she described however. It was a sermon in the form of a “conversation,” between Paul Brubaker of the Middle Creek congregation and me. You can imagine what our task was—in a denomination that was trying to heal from a contentious meeting the previous year. We were being asked to model a way of being together and talking together, especially when we don’t agree—sometimes passionately disagree. And you might guess—Paul is male, he’s a free minister in a large conservative CoB congregation near Ephrata. And I...not so much...male nor conservative. But Paul agreed to preach, with me, a woman, in the pulpit. Some of you were there and others watched via live-stream. In a nutshell, we called our sermon “The Road between Ephrata and Elizabethtown” because that is how we traveled in preparation for our conversation—it symbolized a road not all that long geographically, but a great distance between endpoints theologically.

And I’ve been thinking about that conversation and how things have unfolded since that time. I’d like to share just a few minutes of the ending. Paul and I had a dialog back and forth and this is my closing argument!

I found Paul to be most gracious and respectful and willing to engage. When we parted, we vowed to continue the friendship and to his credit—he and Evie hosted Dave and I for a most delightful and delicious PA Dutch meal that next Christmas.

At that time, for me, the bottom line for the future of the church was forbearance. Could we agree that we didn’t have to agree on everything? Could we agree that it was becoming futile to try to convince the other? And could we gather around

2 the things that unite us and set aside the things that divide us. (It sounds a lot like the Compelling Vision process). It's still the bottom line for me, but it feels like we're further from it than ever.

Fast forward...a few years—Annual Conference 2019 in Greensboro, NC. I was a facilitator of a table of eight delegates, who couldn't have been more diverse. We covered well the breadth of the continuum in every way. At first, our discussion around the table was amicable and helpful. With each question, however, it became clear that the sister, seated directly across the round table, was adamant that we would know and agree that the bottom line is that our energy and efforts, above all, are to make sure that people are saved. Nothing else matters, she said, if people aren't saved...and she frequently quoted scripture to support this theology. We, her tablemates, were eager to discuss a church that claims no force in religion, a church that desires to serve God and neighbors, one that buys tractors for Nigeria, and cares deeply for the environment. And the conversation began to weary us, and as the table facilitator, I felt responsible. The most poignant moment, though, was around our discussion of human sexuality. She clearly opposed same sex marriage and considered homosexuality a sin. Drawing on my conversation with Paul a few years earlier, I said to her, "I see you are a woman of strong convictions and we will most likely never agree on all of the issues. But I can affirm you as a person of deep faith and as a sister in Christ. Can you do the same for me?" And she looked me directly in the eye and shook her head no.

It was a very low point for me. When I shared that experience with my colleagues here in Etown, we pastors thought that it would be interesting to explore this a bit further. Christianity can be a turn-off, especially when it feels judgmental and exclusive. Some are left wondering, why be Christian when so much of what we hear and see and experience from organized religion flies in the face of our understanding of a loving God? If Jesus was not primarily a teacher of either correct beliefs or right morals but of authentic human relationships,

what does that imply for us, as followers of Jesus, as we move into the future?

One of my favorite pastors and bloggers writes that for some folks, like the sister at the table, Christianity is correct beliefs and right morals. He is finding it more and more difficult with each passing day to outwardly claim this faith because of what that allegiance now immediately aligns him with, in the eyes of a watching world. He claims that much of Christianity today would be unrecognizable to Jesus.¹

He also points to hope—that there are loving, inclusive, beautiful communities filled with people of compassion and generosity and mercy. And I believe that I'm looking at one. They believe, he maintains, that compassion is our highest aspiration and that Jesus' ministry might be distilled into that one word...compassion.

And so, as we turn over a new leaf this fall, let's take a closer look at this highest aspiration—compassion—that can lead us into a new decade and beyond as faithful followers of Jesus' way.

PHILIPPIANS 2:1–5 (THE MESSAGE/NRSV)

If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have compassion, if you care—then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.

Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human!

¹ johnpavolitz.com, *Stuff that Needs to be Said*

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Compassion is woven throughout the scriptures. It seeps through the pages of the Old Testament, pours out of the Gospels and presents itself as a challenge to us. The scriptures talk of a God who has compassion for Israel. Our passage this morning from Philippians, penned by the apostle Paul, tells of a savior who serves the world and it instructs us as well, to live and act compassionately.

- In Mary's Magnificat—she sings of compassion
 - For liberation from oppression
 - protection from enemies
 - and a world of peace
- In Mark 10—blind beggar beseeches Jesus to heal him—he calls on Jesus' compassion and Jesus responds
- In the parable of Good Samaritan, the one who showed compassion was held as an example for how to treat our neighbors, near and far
- And Jesus' very own words in his sermon on the Plain, as found in Luke 6: Be compassionate just as God is compassionate.

The study of this word, *compassion*, is an interesting one. One source cited the Latin origin, literally meaning “to feel with or to bear or feel the suffering of another” — not just intellectually but also, viscerally. The Hebrew and Aramaic word, **racham**,² is the plural of a noun that in its singular form means “womb.” To be compassionate, then, is to be womblike: life-giving, nourishing, perhaps embracing and encompassing. To be compassionate is to feel for another the way a mother feels for the children of her womb; she loves them, wills their being, and sometimes becomes fierce, that mama bear, when their well-being is threatened. Jesus affirmed this understanding as he modeled and taught the nourishing, life-giving, all-embracing practice of compassion. He disregarded laws, rules

²David M. Felten and Jeff Procter-Murphy, *Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity*, p. 207.

and customs that got in the way of compassion. And far more than just a feeling, he acted in accord with that feeling. God is not primarily a threatening judge to whom we appeal for mercy, but a life-giving and nourishing reality who wills our well-being and the well-being of the whole of creation, just as a mother wills the well-being of the children of her womb. And this is how we should be.

I found the following on our church webpage: *We Brethren are known as a people of compassion and action. We believe following Christ means following his example of serving others, healing the broken, and bringing new life and hope to the despairing. We take seriously Jesus' call to love all people, including the enemy.* Compassion is woven throughout our history and our tradition. Church can be and should be a refuge, where we come together to learn and grow and be nurtured spiritually. At the same time, it is a launching pad. It is about equipping ourselves to go back out into an often-times bad news world with a good news ministry, the ministry of compassion.

There is a story in which a student of anthropologist Dr. Margaret Mead asked her to describe the earliest sign of civilization in a given culture. Expecting a treatise on clay pots or crude axes or grinding stones, Dr. Mead's answer was simply "a healed femur," the human thighbone. She went on to explain that a healed femur indicated that someone cared, someone had compassion. Someone had to do the injured person's hunting and gathering until the leg was healed. That evidence of compassion, she said, is the first sign of civilization.³

I see many acts of compassion in this congregation. Caregivers for families struggling with cancer, hot meals provided for weeks, for families in need, a congregant offering prayer for a leader during difficult times, transportation for a senior no longer able to drive, care for creation through new and innovative technology, support for someone dealing with legal issues, a visit to our local politicians' offices on behalf of those seeking justice, encouragement for a young person dealing with mental health issues, accompaniment for an

³Ibid., 207-8.

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undocumented immigrant, financial support when the ends just won't meet, and that is just the tip of the iceberg.

I have hope. I think that being Christian in 2020 looks a lot like compassion, where we can affirm one another as faithful followers of Jesus, even when we might not agree on everything.

And we claim that hope...hope that there are loving, inclusive, beautiful communities, like this one, filled with people of compassion, a compassion that is deeply rooted within, to help make this world better, where God's kingdom might come and God's will be done, on earth, Amen.

