

“A Vision for the Church: Having the Mind of Christ Jesus”  
 Philippians 2:1-13  
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#### INTRODUCTION:

“This is my prayer for you: that your love may grow stronger and stronger with clear knowledge and discerning insight so you can figure out for yourselves what really matters ... through the power of Christ for the glory and praise of God.” Paul’s prayer for his beloved church in Philippi is my vision for us as well. As I said last week as I introduced this sermon series, this prayer captures so much of my hope for this place: that our love grows vigorous and strong; that we nurture our love through rigorous thinking and discernment; and that we learn to lean on the Lord instead of approaching our faith as an exercise in self-help. Last week I summarized this vision; today, and in my next two sermons, I will be fleshing out what that means to us in a practical and visible way. Today, we start with *love*; next time we’ll focus on *discernment*; and we’ll close by exploring our *trust* in the Lord. Today our reading is taken from Philippians 2:1-13.

Today I want to talk about love. Not the “Sex in the City” kind of love; not even the Hallmark cards kind of love. Today I want to talk about real love, muscular love; the kind of love God wants from us ... the kind of love Jesus showed us how to do.

This is the kind of love the apostle Paul is getting at in the verses that we read this morning: “If 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.**” Love is the core of Paul’s prayer for the church ... but the love he has in mind has nothing to do with sentimentality, and everything to do with attitude. And nowhere is this attitude more clear than in Jesus himself, who instead of exploiting his power, his status, humbled himself, even to death on the cross, for our sake. Jesus, who taught that the point of the law is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind, and with all your strength; and [to] love your neighbor as yourself” – Jesus knew better than anyone that love is not an exercise in sentimentality. Love is a vigorous discipline, and it can be costly indeed.

This morning I want to explore how *we* can grow to have this kind of love ourselves – a love that not only disregards our issues of status and standing, but urges us to set aside our own glory in order to fulfill our higher calling through Christ our Lord.

Over twenty years ago, when I was first starting out in ministry, psychologist M. Scott Peck wrote a best-selling book, *The Road Less Traveled*. It is still one of the best books on life, and faith, and love. One of the key points he makes is this: we confuse *feeling* love with love:

“Love is an action, an activity,” Peck says. “Love is not a feeling.”

Most people genuinely feel love, but feelings alone do not love make. We can *feel* love for someone but then act in all manner of unloving ways: we can lean on them dependently like a crutch; we can profess our devotion to our family while we work 80 hours a week; we can smother our loved ones with attention to feel better about ourselves; we can push our kids into “successes” to manage our own egos. Feelings alone are not real love.

Now, the feeling of love is one of the most delicious experiences we will ever have. We are hard-wired to feel love, and there is nothing that feels quite so complete, makes us feel so alive, so real, than falling in love, and knowing that someone loves us back absolutely ... or for those

of us who have been blessed with children, that feeling of having a baby, and being overwhelmed with the fullness of our heart for this child. The feeling of love is so exquisite that when someone we love has died, our hearts ache with the emptiness of our loss. The *feeling* of love is a gift of God, and I for one treasure it as deeply as life itself.

When the feeling of love is present, we feel most keenly alive. But as Peck reminds us, when the feeling fades, as it inevitably does, “the commitment to love, the will to love, still stands.”<sup>2</sup>

Love, real love, Peck says, is not a feeling but a choice, a decision, a commitment ... whether or not the feeling is present. And that makes all the difference in the world.

That’s what I learned about the theory when I began my ministry. And then I started watching for it, wondering if it were really true. Over the years, this is what I remember seeing: On my internship in a church in suburban Long Island, the first funeral I ever did — when I was 23 years old — was for a 23-year-old man who was killed in a fight at a bar; he was in the parking lot and had gotten punched, and cracked his head on the sidewalk. This young man’s father was devastated. But over time, he decided to drop charges against the man who’d killed his son, because he didn’t want another young life wasted by languishing in jail. I don’t know if that father ever *felt* love for the man who ended the life of his son, but he *loved* him nonetheless.

And, as I recall it, when a member of my church in Portland – a notorious member of my church, who’d been known to do drugs and leave her children alone without supervision, who’d blown through every treatment program in town – when this woman finally decided to get the help she so desperately needed, but couldn’t afford it because, of course, her job didn’t cover insurance, a couple members of that church quietly fronted the money through the pastors, making sure she never knew who made it possible for her to get clean, and stay clean, and if needed, pay for the vast quantity of meds she’d be on for the rest of her life. There were precious few *feelings* of love lost on that woman ... but those people loved her nonetheless. They loved her back to life again.

And, as I understand it, the Session of my church in Clarendon Hills decided, before I came, that they would become a PADS-supporting church ... not only with their time and money, but as a once-a-week overnight shelter site. Friendships were strained; neighbors were pitted against each other, the Session was split. Nevertheless, people on both sides of the aisle agree that it was that church’s finest hour when the moderator of the Session announced at a town meeting that the church was not in the habit of asking anyone’s permission to do its mission. The congregation stuck together and stood up for the homeless in the western suburbs ... not because they *felt* sweetness and light towards each other or even toward the PADS guests, but because they believed it was what love called them to do.

What does Jesus want from us? He tells us very clearly: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The apostle Paul says it this way: “If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, 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. Have this mind among yourselves, the mind [of love] that was in Christ Jesus.”

My friend Michael Lindvall, pastor of Brick Church in New York, once said it this way:

“Each individual is of inestimable worth, not just the strong or the clever or the beautiful, ... not just those who are helpful to my ends or convenient to me. If there is a loving God, human worth is not utilitarian. ... [And if] God values us all, ... even the non-productive, ... if God loves people who do not look and think like me, if God loves people who are not my kind, if God loves those who are not so bright and strong, then I, too, must struggle to love all of God’s children.”<sup>3</sup>

Not to *feel* love for them, but to *love* them.

Is it easy? Hardly. Is it impossible? No. Not because of any human virtues of our own, but because the love of God is stronger than any barriers our worst prejudices and broken hearts and angriest opinions can construct. And I pray, I truly pray, that our work of love starts here ... in this church ... in this time. Not by avoiding conflict and our often real differences, but by acting in love, even when we don’t feel like it ... Not by pretending we have no power to make a difference, but to empty ourselves for the least powerful, for the least visible, and for the least lovely ... just as Jesus did for us. And sometimes, opportunities present themselves when we least expect them.

My identical twin sister Karen, who pastors a church in Granville, Ohio, saw it with her own eyes. Now Granville is not a big town, and because it was founded well over 200 years ago as a part of New England’s Western Reserve, it is, shall we say, tradition bound. It frankly makes Lake Forest and Lake Bluff look positively *avant garde*. Which makes the story she tells even more astonishing. This is what she says:

“Larry is a member of the (very progressive) American Baptist Church across the street. I first got to know him when our two churches offered a summer reading series on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Larry was a regular member of that group. It was obvious from the outset that he had issues – he needed a lot of floor time – but he was always sweet and appreciative. He dressed a little more provocatively than most Presbyterians – his earrings were a little more flashy and his dresses were sometimes a little short, but he added a lot of color to our staid little community.

“I soon learned that Larry was bi-polar. The summer study was over, so I didn’t see him much, but I knew from the Baptist pastor and staff that they were worried. He went off his medication and he got manic and his rage started showing up. He was becoming disruptive to the church and increasingly demanding. People were starting to get scared. At one point Larry came to our church because he was mad at the Baptists and I was so ‘nice.’ I let the Session know what was going on, just to be safe, but wasn’t too worried.

“Larry landed in jail when he attacked his father. The good news was he got back on his medication and started getting calmer. When he was calmer, he was willing to get help. When he got out, his Baptist friends welcomed him back with some clear guidelines for his behavior. He started attending Al-Anon again and seemed to have some peace. But the depression haunted him now.

“Larry showed up again at our church about two months ago. He was in a manic phase again, on top of the world. He strode down the aisle during the prelude with a flourish: black wig, red nails, high heels, and short black cocktail dress. He sat down in the front pew, just down from the Lowells and their little boys. Thom, my new colleague, had never met Larry; Thom shot me a look across the chancel like, ‘Do you see what I see?’ I nodded and mouthed, ‘It’s OK.’

“The youth choir was singing that day. Larry happened to be sitting on the same side as the boys, and I would have given a million bucks to see the looks on their faces. What I could see was the director’s face when the kids got up to sing. As the choir stood on the steps just a few feet in front of Larry, Joy kept motioning and saying, ‘Look at *me!*’

“What I couldn’t see until the anthem was over was that Larry had started crying, weeping uncontrollably. As the choir went to sit back down, I saw Dillon, the Lowell’s five-year-old, quietly handing Larry a Kleenex.

As the kids came up for Thom’s children’s sermon, I walked down the side aisle to where Laura Hill was sitting. Laura is a psychologist and a damned good counselor in addition to being a very compassionate Christian. I leaned over and started to ask her to sit with Larry; she interrupted me and said, ‘I felt like I wanted to go be with him, I just didn’t know if it would be OK. Thank you for giving me God’s call.’ I walked with her around the back of the sanctuary so she could go up the other aisle to where Larry was, and quickly gave her a synopsis of what I knew. As she sat down beside him I heard her ask respectfully, ‘May I sit here?’

“That day we had communion, and together, Larry and Laura sat at table with the rest of us in the kingdom of God.

“When I checked in with Laura the next day to thank her, she shared with me a little bit of their conversation. At one point Larry had said through his tears, ‘I feel so unworthy to be here.’ And she answered, ‘Oh, me too, me too, that’s why I come. I need to be here, too.’”

“If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, ... any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, ... 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 of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus”: the mind, the commitment, of love. Amen.

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1 M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 116f.

2 Michael Lindvall (pastor, Brick Church, New York), unpublished paper presented at The Moveable Feast: 1997, Princeton, NJ (citing Glenn Tinder’s “Can We Be Good Without God?” *Atlantic Monthly*, Dec 1989).

3 Karen Chakoian (pastor, Granville, Ohio), unpublished paper presented at The Moveable Feast: 2004)