

Coping with Other's Expectations – Like Jesus Did **Philippians 2:1-13**
 Saint Marks United Methodist Church, Charleston, WV
 17th Sunday after Pentecost (September 28) 2014

¹ So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ²complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. ¹²Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

In the very first chapter of the first book of the Bible, we read a description about CREATION. We are told over and over again in that creation story that God saw “that it was good,” up until the final day of creation when we are told “**God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was VERY good.**”

Creation – including our lives – is meant to be lived in HARMONY

- not UNIFORMITY
- but HARMONY.

Look at what God's paint brush is doing to the landscape all around us in this season and you will see just how much God enjoys harmony AND diversity.

Today is the last sermon in our series, “Home to Harmony.” Two weeks ago Janet preached on the text from Matthew about HARMONY within THE CHURCH. Last Sunday's scripture is about HARMONY WITH THE KINGDOM OF

HEAVEN. And today we will address HARMONY WITH SELF AND OTHERS, i.e. YOU CAN'T BE IN HARMONY WITH OTHER FOLKS IF YOU ARE OUT OF HARMONY WITH YOURSELF.

I will not like other people very much if they don't like me. And other people will have a hard time liking me if I don't like me. And so I put on masks to try to make myself likeable and acceptable.

I've been reading a book called *The Girl Who Sang to the Buffalo: A Child, an Elder, and the Light from an Ancient Sky*. It's the third in a series of books that an Anglo, Kent Nerburn, has written about Native American/Indians, at the request of Dan, an elder of the Lakota nation, who selected Nerburn to tell his story.

In this third book, Grover -- one of Dan's younger, but long time, associates and protégés -- took Nerburn out into the country under the wide open Great Northern Plains sky, lit some tobacco and sage, to sanctify their conversation before the Creator, and told Nerburn that he had some truth that needed to be spoken. Here's a snippet of that conversation:

"You're a hard man, Grover," [Nerburn] said.

"And you're a soft man, Nerburn. You think being nice is the same as being good."

"They're close cousins, I would think," [Nerburn] answered.

"Well, you would think wrong, 'Nice' is about wanting people to like you. 'Good' is about doing what you're supposed to do, even if nobody likes you. When you're worried about being liked, it gives people too much power over you. They can lead you around like a dog chasing a bone. All they got to do is withhold their approval and you'll p[---] down your leg to make them like you. You're an easy mark. That's one of the reasons I've never quite trusted you. ...

"Sometimes wrong is wrong, and being nice just lets the wrong grow stronger. ... You follow me?"

"I follow you, but I'm not sure I agree with you."

"Well trust me. A man can't see the shape of his own house when he's standing in it. I'm just trying to level with you." (The Girl Who Sang to the

Buffalo, A Child, an Elder & The Light From an Ancient Sky, by Kent Nerburn (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2013) pp. 153, 161)

I will not like other people very much if they don't like me. And other people will have a hard time liking me if I don't like me. And so I put on masks to try to make myself NICE and acceptable.

I just finished reading a book written about 130 years ago – by Leo Tolstoy – entitled *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*.

Ivan Ilyich spent his whole life trying to be acceptable. He did all the socially acceptable things. On his deathbed, he enters into something that the reader recognizes as prayer (even if Ilyich would not recognize it as such.) And he asks to be allowed to continue living. But a Voice inside of himself asks him why he wants to continue in this thing he calls life – why he would want to hold on to what he has been doing.

Then, in one of the more depressing pieces of literature I've ever read, Ivan Ilyich recalls his life, and it seems to him that it's all been in a downward spiral ever since he left childhood. But, in refusing to accept that reality, he keeps returning to his whole adult mantra: *I'm doing all the socially acceptable things; I'm doing the right stuff.*

It is not until Ivan Ilyich finally admits to himself that he had done it wrong – that spending his life trying to live up to other's expectations – had been the wrong thing, that he is finally released from his suffering.

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In the book we are reading for our Monday Night Study, *The Me I Want to Be*, we have learned that there are lots of ME's that fascinate and entice us:

- The Me I Don't Want to Be

- The Me I Pretend to Be
- The Me I Think I Should Be
- The Me Other People Want Me to Be
- The Me I'm Afraid God Wants Me to Be
- The Me That Fails to Be

But I will never find HARMONY until I release these OTHER BASED expectations and become the ME GOD MADE ME TO BE. In so doing, it's not so much that I become HOLIER, as I become ME-ier.

I will not like other people very much if they don't like me. And other people will have a hard time liking me if I don't like me. And so I put on masks to try to make myself NICE and acceptable.

In today's scripture, we hear a wonderful hymn sung by the early Church, through which Paul tells them and us to HAVE THE MIND OF CHRIST.

Jesus knew who he was.

HUMILITY spoken of in verse three does not mean "self-absement" or "self-littling." It means (from its word word, "*humus* – earth") BEING WELL GROUNDED – having an accurate self assessment.

JESUS KNEW WHO HE WAS.

He went through Baptism and received the name that we each receive in our Baptism – if we will but remember: *BELOVED CHILD OF GOD, PRECIOUS AND BEAUTIFUL TO BEHOLD.*

Then he immediately was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan – offering all kinds of expectations that others would have of his ministry – which he learned from this early point on was not how he would shape his life – regardless of who or how much others expressed these expectations. Jesus remained WHO GOD MADE HIM TO BE.

And then we find – dropping down to verse 12 – how this MIND OF CHRIST – this true humility/true self-assessment – gets lived out in harmony with God.

We WORK OUT OUR OWN SALVATION –“our own” refers to the fact that you and I are not mass produced; we are each individually the work of God’s hands.

By FEAR AND TREMBLING – which means PEELING AWAY AL THE MASKS, by releasing ourself from all the EXPECTATIONS OF OTHERS. In being simply the ME GOD CREATED ME TO BE.

- Round pegs don’t fit into square holes.
- Square pegs don’t fit into round holes.

I will not like other people very much if they don’t like me. And other people will have a hard time liking me if I don’t like me.

And I will never much really like me until I peel away all the masks I have been taught to wear to try to make myself NICE and acceptable.

Then we will live a life that is God who is working in us, bot to will and to work for his good pleasure ...WHICH BECOMES OUR GOOD PLEASURE AS WELL. And when God and we agree, and are in harmony, it’s amazing how likeable life will become, indeed.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.