

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on Sunday, December 6, 2009 based on Philippians 1:3-11.

Determining What Is Best

Linda Raybern writes: *I will never forget the Christmas of my seventh year. I was going to sing several carols with my classmates in the Christmas pageant at school. We had been practicing for about a month. A week before the pageant, my mother's family had their Christmas celebration. Mother had been bragging about how I was to sing at school and I was cajoled into singing one of the carols for the clan gathered there.*

Telling my aunt which carol to play, I sang out as sweetly and sincerely as only a seven-year old can...

*"Hark! Old Harold's angel sings, glory to the newborn King,
Peace on earth so mercy smiles, 'cause God and reptiles reconciled..."*

That is as far as I got because my aunt could no longer play the piano, she was laughing so hard. My uncle laughed so hard he spilled his drink on his lap and when he tried to mop it up; he lost his balance and slid out of his chair.

I was mortified. I had no idea why everyone was laughing at me. I burst into tears and ran upstairs to my bedroom crying.

How many of you are planning to send Christmas cards this year?
How many of you just sign your name to all your cards without write a note?

My hunch is that if you are going to take time to send someone a Christmas card, you will take time to write a line or two to personalize each

card. The exterior of each of your cards might look the same, but inside there will be an individualized expression of appreciation.

Well, our scripture today from the apostle Paul is a note of appreciation and love as Paul writes a congregation he founded in Macedonia which is part of modern day Greece. Throughout this letter, there are words of appreciation and affection as Paul communicates with them while he is in prison.

Biblical scholars debate on where he was in prison but most agree he is in prison because of his ministry for Jesus Christ. Yet as you heard today, his words are joyful and hopeful. Philippians is one of the most uplifting books in the Bible. Yes, Paul has some concerns about divisions and lack of unity in the congregation, but he addresses those concerns in a very pastoral way. I invite you to read Philippians this week!

Philippians is one of 7 letters of Paul in the New Testament. Some of us at FCC finished a video study called "Living the Questions" recently. In the series, the presenters stated that there is considerable consensus among Biblical scholars that of the 13 letters in the New Testament with Paul's name on them, 7 were written by Paul, 2 probably written by one of his followers, and 4 written by a later generation that didn't mind putting Paul's name on it to give it more authority as if to say Paul might have said this if he were still alive.

Many of the participants found this information helpful as a way to understand and interpret almost ½ the books in the New Testament. One participant was so enthused about this information; he hoped that it could be shared with the congregation on Sundays. Today, I start that sharing.

Paul has a prayer for his readers today. He prays that he hopes they determine what is best. How do you determine what is best? How do you know what is best? What measurement do you use to determine what is best?

Our president this week announced what he thought was best for our military involvement in Afghanistan. This appeared to come after a long discernment process. This week the County Board of Cook County repealed a ½ cent sales tax. How did they determine what was best? This week businesses will determine what is best for their business in the next months. How do they determine what is best? What is the measurement?

How do you determine what is best? And how do you know what is best for you will be best for others? How do you determine what is best?

Well, Paul seems to give us an answer to determine what is best. He says in his letter, *"And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best,.."* Determining what is best seems to be about love, knowledge and insight.

Love is a big topic! We know to be Christian is about love. But how do we do it without smothering the other person and giving them freedom? How do we stay connected when we feel like running away when we are hurt in a relationship? How do we love in a way Paul is speaking today?

Knowledge and insight teaches us how to love the way Jesus intended. One of the pieces of knowledge about love and relationships that I have learned in the last 5 years has to do with a method called the "Family System Theory." The Family System method of group dynamics

was proposed by an American psychologist by the name of Murray Bowen. This method tries to understand what happens when people come together and interact, how they mutually influence each other's behaviors, how change in one person affects another, and how they create something larger than themselves. "The genius of this method," writes Peter Steinke, a practitioner of this method, "is that it makes visible what is invisible. It presents concepts that give insight into human behavior. At the core of the theory are two variables – the degree of anxiety and the capacity to differentiate."

The goal is to be a self-differentiating person that is connected but not fused to others, an individual but not distant from others. It is a method that helps me understand anxiety and relationships.

This method borrow from other disciplines that teaches that we have 3 basic centers in our brain that influence how we behavior. There is the basic center called our reptilian brain. It controls are basic instincts and controls our "fight or flight" behavior. This center makes us afraid and suspicious and makes us want to fight or run away.

The next center is known as the mammalian center. This is our playful nature. This is the place where we smile, laugh, and care about each other. Then there is the thinking, frontal center. This is the area where we can think large concepts and think through difficult situations.

When we become afraid or anxious, according to this method, the less rational and playful we are and the more reactionary we become. Perhaps you can think of times you have been reactionary, playful or rational. You can also think of what caused those moments of reaction,

play and higher thinking. The goal of family systems thinking is to recognize anxiety, practice ways to cut down the anxiety, and invite people to think higher to solve any situation.

Let's see how it worked for Linda when she was 7 years old. Remember that she was the little girl who ran away to her room when she was embarrassed about the way she sang, "Hark the Herald, Angels Sing." She had already practiced flight in this situation.

Linda goes on to write - *I really was surprised when my oldest and most straitlaced aunt came into my room. (I had always been a little afraid of her.) She tenderly took me in her arms and with loving words told me not to cry. Everyone was laughing because of the wonderful new words I had sung for that Christmas carol. And even though everyone else had learned it a different way, mine was so much better.*

She kissed me and then washed my face and told me to come downstairs with her because there was a surprise waiting for me. Hand in hand we took the stairs down to the living room. Just as we got there the music began to play and the whole family began to sing my misconstrued version of "Hark the Herald Angels Sings," I felt more loved than I ever had in my life.

My lips were still trembling as I stepped forward and began to sing. As my extended family sang carol after carol and arms slipped around each other in a warm familial glow, I realized Christmas wasn't about festive decorations or the Christmas tree or even the gifts under it. Christmas is about love given freely and with joy.

As one of my older cousins gave me a squeeze and a smile, I was sure "Hark, old Harold's angel," was singing with us, and I had gotten the words right after all.

We find ourselves in anxious moments all the time. We are called to determine what is best in each situation. Paul teaches us today that to determine what is best is to love more and more with knowledge and insight. The only way we can do this is to learn some things about how we react to situations and use the power of love that comes from God and Christ to think and act higher. When we do, "God and reptiles do reconcile" and we are ready to determine what is best. Amen.