When the word “church” comes to mind, all of us have a word, image or feeling that defines the Body of Christ. For some, the church is a spiritual home. For others, church is God’s house …or God’s people, the community of faith …or an institution to which one belongs. Sad to say, when some people hear the word “church,” they remember some pain inflicted on them years ago, a sense of guilt, terror, or even dread. For many in our society today, church means just a building they pass on their way to work--or even worse, it means nothing at all.

The apostle Paul was the founder of many Christian churches in the middle of the first century. One of those churches was the community of faith in the northern Greek city of Philippi, named for Philip, the father of Alexander the Great. This small band of Christians probably met in the homes of its members. From the Book of Acts, we know that Lydia was probably a member of this church as was the town jailer and his family. One cannot read Paul’s letter to the Philippian
Christians and not sense a deep, powerful love between this congregation and the old apostle.

We just heard one of the most beautiful pleas for Christian unity in the New Testament. Like a parent wooing a child to do the right thing, Paul invites these new Christians to discover the joy and blessing of being a community of faith that both knows and experiences the deep satisfaction of sharing life with one another even as they honor the presence of Christ in their midst.

Every church would be strengthened if they heard and put these words into action on a regular basis. So let Paul’s plea for unity wake us up today...

For just a moment, close your eyes and savor the first six words of that reading as you hear them again. “Encouragement . . . consolation . . . love . . . sharing . . . compassion . . . sympathy”.
Both individually and together these words breathe life into our common gathering just like the wind of Pentecost gave birth to the Church. To use another metaphor, these words suggest the presence of a deep well of empathy and caring already present among the Philippian Christians. Paul is not suggesting these realities were absent from the church, but rather he asks these believers to let these words live in their common life.

Encouragement flows from one person to the other as consolation…

…and consolation flows back to another as encouragement.

Love is impossible to experience without sharing

…and sympathy is hollow without compassion.

Compassion, as if to start the sequence all over again, is always an expression of consolation and encouragement, sharing our love for others.
A church that lives these gifts finds it very difficult if not impossible to know strife, envy, conflict, or division. Perhaps we might consider inscribing them on the walls of our hearts lest we forget these bedrock realities as followers of Jesus Christ.

A bit further on in the reading, Paul then asks his Christian friends to “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” Then with one gentle nudge, he sums his plea up by writing, “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ.” These sentences could be summed up in the world generosity. When we live out of a godly, caring, serving generosity with each other, all of us receive back the gifts we give. It is all “paid forward.”

To put it another way, selfishness suffocates in an atmosphere of generosity. Why? Because as each of us looks out for the other, we find it difficult (if not impossible!) to focus on ourselves. When you and I highly regard our brothers and sisters, we honor each other in love, we
discover the very mind of Christ in our community as a living reality from which we draw strength and find hope.

Now you might have noticed that I omitted some powerful words at the very center of today’s scripture. And you’re right. But here they are. Paul writes in bold script, “Make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” Saying as loudly as ink can say it on parchment that Christian unity, having the same mind, outdoing each other in love, is what creates joy and Christian unity.

Don’t think that our church (or any church!) will ever come to unity by the passing of edicts, the learning of theology, the reciting of creeds, or the hearing of Scripture – all good things in and of themselves, but powerless to create unity much less joy in our community of faith. So what do we do with Paul’s plea? Where do we go from here?
Let us come to the altar where the direction is clearly expressed.