

Of the same mind? (Philippians 2:1-13)

Are there healthy, non-authoritarian ways to approach Paul's call to like-mindedness?

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In this week's reading from Philippians, Paul takes an early church hymn extolling Christ and repurposes it as a set of instructions for healthy relationships in community. Paul urges his hearers toward an intense, intimate kind of unity: "Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind."

The Greek text rendered "[be] of one mind" could be translated more literally as "think the same thing." Be like-minded. Be one in spirit. These are strong-sounding words—perhaps especially to those of us who are wary of authoritarian leadership, leery of what might sound like an impetus toward conformity. Are there healthy ways of being of the same mind? Or is it only and always groupthink at best, brainwashing at worst?

Perhaps there is more to these instructions than meets the eye. The word translated as "thinking" in verse 2 is used elsewhere in Philippians to convey concern for another person's wellbeing; we might imagine someone calling or texting us, saying, "thinking of you." In 1:7 Paul uses this word to communicate how deeply he cares for the Philippian believers: he "think[s] this way about all of [them]"—that is, with thankfulness and confidence (1:3-6)—because he "[has] them in [his] heart" (1:7).

He uses the same word later on to describe a general sense of relational harmony; in 4:2, Paul urges Euodia and Syntyche to, literally translated, “think the same thing.” Surely he does not intend for these two female leaders to think all the same thoughts as one another—but he does hope they’re able to talk through their tensions and recognize their connectedness in Christ.

The *First Nations Version* seems to have this meaning in mind when it renders 2:1–2 like this: “As you walk the road with the Chosen One, have you gained from him courage for the journey? Have you found comfort in his love? Do you share together in his Spirit? Has his tenderness and mercy captured your heart? If so, then have the same kind of thoughts. Love with one heart. Join together in one Spirit. And walk side by side on one path. This will make my heart leap for joy.”

The *First Nations Version* imagines Paul encouraging the Philippians believers not to conform to one particular way of seeing the world but rather to “walk side by side.” As they journey together, they are to have the same kinds of thoughts, perhaps, as Christ has: thoughts of courage, comfort, sharing. Thoughts of tenderness and mercy. Thoughts of love, connection, joy. Not the exact same beliefs about everything, but an unshakeable sense of shared life together along the way.

Researcher and storyteller Brené Brown, as she researched the idea of belonging, found that many people are experiencing a sense of “spiritual disconnection”—that is, a “diminishing sense of shared humanity.” According to Brown, people deeply desire “to be a part of something” and “to experience real connection with others”—but “not at the cost of their authenticity, freedom, or power.” Brown laments the loss of a “spirit . . . of saying, ‘Yes, we are different in many ways, but under it all we’re deeply connected.’”

I think this is the kind of spirit Paul writes in. It’s a spirit that acknowledges all our many differences and does not downplay or deny them—and yet still wants us to think of one another with care and base our interactions on a deep sense of interconnectedness. In a community like this—to riff on the language of our reading—we are safe to reveal ourselves, secure to humble ourselves, free to offer our humility, inspired to consider others’ needs and not just our own. We are invited to pursue a kind of unity that does not require us to conform but draws out our uniqueness. We are grounded in Christ’s love and fellowship, rooted in Christ’s example of how we might live.