

When our six Las Cruces grandchildren were young, our family went on a camping trip to the Gila Wilderness. We camped near Bear Lake, hoping to eventually have fun in the water with the canoe we had brought. The campsite we found was just right for our three campers and was complete with a nice high hill on one side, which the children immediately took as their own for the weekend. The hill was perfect --quite steep and padded with a thick layer of pine needles. The kids were soon running up and down it and making up games of adventure.

My husband, Steve, was watching the children, and imagining that if only we had brought a large piece of cardboard, they could have fun sliding down the hill on it. Then, he looked over at the canoe, lying 30 feet away; And he thought- why not use the canoe? The children thought it was a great idea, and soon they were all lugging the canoe up the hill, and then jumping in, as the canoe began to slide down. We all had turns in the canoe slide, the children always pulling it back up the hill with their energy and determination- and much laughter as they worked as a team.

Then we heard Evan, who was 12 years old,
call out as they reached the top once again:

"This is better than Disney World!"

How do young people manage to teach us so much?

They had become so caught up in their own amusement that they didn't mind the work as they enjoyed the game! They poured all their energy into getting the canoe up the hill so they could ride back down, over and over again.

They slept really well that night in the mountains!

When the Apostle Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians, he was in prison, and wondering about his future; yet he was filled with joy knowing that the people of Philippi had remained faithful since his first visit there 10 years before.

Paul's living conditions must have been unstable and disconcerting, with possible dangers to his life, for he had been arrested by the Roman government.

Even so, he was focused only on one thing- the growth of the infant church

and the subsequent glorification of God.

He wrote the letter to affirm the efforts of his fellow workers in Christ,
and to encourage the new believers. He told them to "stand firm in one spirit,
contending as one man for the faith,"
and to find joy in serving Christ and his church.

It is interesting to me that the verses 5 through 11 are a "Christ hymn,"
which the early church sang together. With their voices united,
they sang in unison of the wonderful attributes of their Lord and Savior.
Many of today's hymns and spiritual songs are sung in harmony,
but they also show an element of unity in the voices,
expressing words that are "of one mind."

The word *harmony* is a musical term that describes several tone layers that are heard at once - and we most often call these tonal layers *chords*.

From the word *chord* also comes the words *accord* and *discord*.

When the notes are in tune they create beautiful harmony, *accord*,
but when there is a lack of tonal harmony they create *discord* for the listener.

The absence of **social harmony**

is also brought about by discord -- in personal relationships.

When musicians play or sing together, they listen to each other in order to blend
and make beautiful music. A voice that sticks out from the rest of the ensemble
creates undue attention to that voice, and the hope of a unified,
cohesive performance is lost;

but we can more appreciate the blend of unique tonal colors of each voice
when one complements the others.

This is the wonderful phenomenon of a church choir:

although most members are not soloists

and some confess they are not formally trained,

or perhaps they can't even read music,

God brings their voices together,

blending them into a beautiful harmony

that reflects God's presence among us.

It is also a good idea to listen when we are engaged in our personal and social relationships. When we listen, we are forgetting ourselves- and focusing our attention on the person who is speaking.

We practice humility when we do this, and recognize that others have important things to say, too.

We empty ourselves, as the Christ hymn describes regarding Jesus.

We let ourselves, our egos, go. We concede in small ways so that our relationships can be harmonious. After all, one person alone cannot wisely and effectively decide for everyone.

There are many voices, many facets of thought that accomplish a particular goal.

Humility is servanthood. Humility looks a lot like death.

In fact, sometimes it **feels** like a death! Our ego wants all the attention, and when we tell it to calm down and take a back seat, we feel like we are putting part of ourselves to death!

We are, for the sake of the gospel, and God uses that death, that sacrifice, for God's own purpose. It is true -- Christ is the icon of humility, the perfect picture of servanthood, selflessness, and sacrifice -- and it is Christ, our Master and Teacher, who has shown us how to live among our neighbors.

It is probably impossible for us to ignore the very human need of self- preservation, for this is how God made us to be. It is our God-given instinct to value and protect ourselves first;

But it is **also** possible to lay aside your own interests, even for a moment, and consider the value of another perspective and what another person has to say!

This 'letting go of self' and regarding others as better than ourselves nurtures humility and brings about the unity that can function so effectively in a church; for unity is necessary

for the good of the whole church's outreach and mission.

It is, with God's help, entirely possible to commit ourselves to the church, but it is not automatic!

We must work at it. God calls us to be like minded in Christ,
to humble ourselves, to be the listener and to always consider others-
to sacrifice, to pour out, or relinquish a part of ourselves,
for the good of the whole.

This is what Christ did for us, even though he was, as God on earth,
entirely capable of denying his commitment to save all of humankind.

This enormous sacrifice of death on the cross --

by one who could have exercised godly privilege rather than
choose ultimate servanthood --

shows the very depth of Christ's love and concern for all of us-
above his own suffering.

It is his sacrifice for our sake that inspires, encourages,
and equips us to serve him for his sake.

However, as hard as we try, our dedication to service is often hindered because of
our humanness- which is our failure to act as we should,
or to treat other people as we ought.

Genuine love and concern for our neighbor is the essence of unity,
and leads the way to letting our collective lights shine for the glory of God. In the
words of first Peter,

"Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others,
faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

If anyone speaks,

he should do it as one speaking the very words of God.

If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides,
so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ."

(1 Peter 4: 10 -11.)

In other words, we are not on this earth to exalt ourselves,

but to commit ourselves to each other and glorify God.

Through our work and daily discipline comes personal satisfaction.

Emptying ourselves for the good of all brings enormous personal reward. Although it is nice to be entertained; To sit back and enjoy watching someone else do the work to make us happy, there is no lasting reward in it.

As our grandchildren discovered, it was much more fun to amuse themselves with their own creativity and effort!

When we come to church expecting to be given something,
there is not the deep inner joy that comes when we give a part of ourselves.

And what about Paul, who as a non-believer in Jesus Christ,
had threatened the disciples and had spoken of murder,
and was on his way to Damascus to capture any men or women
who were professing to be followers of Jesus
and bring them to Jerusalem for punishment?

. Paul's conversion was the result of God's ever-abundant grace that cleansed and transformed his life. Paul's gratitude for Christ being revealed to him was profound, because he recognized the self-righteous person he had been.

He remembered the atrocities he had committed, and yet God chose him.

Now as an apostle he was being persecuted, he was under duress,
and he still found joy! Amazing karma isn't it, that his gratitude to God
for his newfound faith held him above all the pain and suffering
he endured?

In the case of the canoe sliding down the mountain in the Mimbres Valley,
there was a lot of effort!

But the effort of seven and eight-year olds
is quite different from 12 year olds.

Yet all the children put in 100% effort according to their own strength and ability
as they worked together in anticipation of that fun-loving ride down the hill.

This story tells of love, at the outset; and encouragement from each other, willingness
to work together for a common goal

as they poured their total selves into the task at hand

and ultimately found the joy of working together,
with their eyes on the reward, which was to enjoy the mountain
and have fun.

We have always heard that in child's play is the essence of real life,
of practicing for it.

This child's game, that turned out to be better than Disney World, reminds us that
we can have the same sense of joy in our efforts

if we are willing to do the work in the 1st place,
to realize that it won't get done without us;

For isn't our ultimate goal a lofty one, to emulate Christ as Paul did,
by forgetting selfish ambition, sharing in the spirit,
reaching out to others in compassion, and helping to change lives --
to be willing to roll up our shirt sleeves along with everyone else
in order to get things done? God empowers us to do this.

Paul's joy in the people of Philippi was well-founded,
because they had remained "in full accord and of one mind,"
and faithful to their mission to spread the gospel.

Christ encourages us to do the same, here and now.

The ability to "empty ourselves" is an act of obedience
that opens our hearts to the possibilities of good for the whole community.
Then, we can truly work in harmony
and serve the church in unity and peace.

We can use our varied, collective gifts that God has given each of us,
and find the same childlike, inner joy.

By God's boundless grace and mercy, our own joy promises to be complete
if we can keep the spirit of Christ within us
and focus on the mission that is before us now.

We were made expressly to glorify God;

may we always be in harmony with *God's* will. Amen.