



# The Spirit of Adventure!

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Philippians 1:3-6, 18-20; 2:1-4

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We've talked about the cusp of adventure, about strength, vision, and encouragement for the adventure. Today we take a few minutes to talk about the spirit of adventure. A couple of weeks ago, Ann Marie and I had supper with our daughter's family in Charlotte. As soon as it was dark, our grandson Evan said, "Granddad, come with me and Dad." With flashlights in hand, they took me to a nearby golf course with a stream running through it to catch frogs on the golf greens! What kind of spirit does that kind of adventure involve? The spirit of fun. Yes. The spirit of determination. Absolutely. Turns out it was not so easy to catch those frogs. In addition to the spirits of fun and determination we needed the spirits of humility and curiosity. We had to be open to learn and free to fail. Suddenly, Evan leapt into some grasses and caught a huge bullfrog – the size of a small cantaloupe. He said, "We have to go back to the house to show Mom and Grandmom," and we did. They were thrilled. The spirit of adventure with the spirit of humility and curiosity led to the spirit of joy!

Last week we looked at an adventure of the Apostle Paul that took him from the town of Antioch, just north of Jerusalem, all the way across a continent to the town of Philippi in northern Greece where he introduced the businesswoman, Lydia, to Jesus. A church grew there and Paul wrote an endearing letter to them that begins: *I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all, making my prayer with joy*

(Philippians 1:3-4). Listen to his words, “making my prayer with joy.” Paul’s adventure with them was clearly in the spirit of joy.

However, we know his adventure in getting to Philippi and to Lydia was very confusing. His vision was clear but his plans kept being frustrated. All he could do was trust God and try. He needed the spirits of humility and curiosity. Humility – I don’t know the answers. Curiosity – asking questions and praying, “What do we do, Lord?” Last week we talked about two kinds of challenges: technical and adaptive. Technical challenges are those for which you know what to do. Drive a car, read a book, run a meeting or call a friend. Technical challenges may be very complex, yet they are challenges you know how to solve. Adaptive challenges, on the other hand, are challenges for which what we know won’t work.

So how do you solve adaptive challenges? You don’t solve them. You navigate them. The answers aren’t obvious and the only way to move forward is in the spirits of humility and curiosity, with a willingness to experiment, a freedom to probe, to try things. If they work, amplify them. If they fail, dampen them, trust God and try something else. Suppose you go fishing. You bait your hook with a worm and toss it in the water only to discover the fish won’t bite. What do you do? Those among us who love fishing know the answer immediately! Change the bait. In fact, some of

the fun of fishing is figuring out the bait or the lure or the fly to use. So, if the fish don't bite, "change the bait" is a good answer, unless, perhaps, you are a Presbyterian! If you are a Presbyterian you might say, "The fish used to like worms and they *should* like worms so just keep using worms and one day they will like them again!" With adaptive challenges in the spirits of humility and curiosity we have the freedom to trust God, try new things, fail, and try again.

Sometimes, the challenge we face, the adventure we are on, is actually unsolvable, at least not solvable by us. Paul continues in his letter to the Philippians: *for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance* (Philippians 1:19). Deliverance from what? He was in prison for talking about Jesus. While he has the spirit of joy at the work of Jesus, his adventure in prison is a difficult one and he can't solve it. However, he does rely on Jesus for his future, and he then offers this wonderful word, *complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others* (Philippians 2:2-4). Paul brings the spirit of humility into the spirit of adventure, the spirits of mutual respect and mutual service.

Why talk about this? In our homes, in our church, in our places of employment and in our community, we are in a very adaptive reality. The culture was already changing before the pandemic and the pandemic threw change into overdrive. To address adaptive situations where what we know won't work, we have to ask the honest question of each other, "Are you open to a new idea?" Are you, am I, really open? We all think, "Of course I'm open to a new idea." One of the statistics that really bothered me during the years I consulted with congregations, based on the work on change theory by Robert Quinn of Michigan University, is that given the choice between deep change in our own lives or the slow death of our congregation, nine out of ten people will choose slow death. "Things are good enough for me." When Paul says *in humility count others more significant than yourselves*, he is asking us to have the actual humility of Jesus.

Of course, we all want to be responsive to people's preferences if it's at all possible. For example, our second service will be tilting in a more traditional direction to be responsive to people. In doing that, there will be people who prefer other approaches. When whatever happens in our home, church, or other places isn't our preference, even though it's intent is to be more helpful, suddenly looking out for the interests of others isn't so easy.

When Ann Marie was doing her consulting work, she had fun telling a story on me. One morning she was on a business trip and I took the used coffee filter and grounds out of the coffee machine and, knowing the trash basket was next to the refrigerator behind me, I thought I'd be a Michael Jordan and just toss it over my head behind me. I did and heard a "plop!" Not a good sound. I turn around. No trash basket – and grounds everywhere – on the wall, on the fridge, all over the floor. A search turned up the trash basket under the kitchen sink. When I spoke with Ann Marie later that day, she explained that is where she felt it should be. However, I liked the trash basket by the refrigerator. I was used to the trash basket by the refrigerator, and I knew the house wanted the trash basket by the refrigerator. I was annoyed for weeks. Then I thought, "Whoa, if something so trivial as the moving of a trash basket annoys me, no wonder people, and certainly church people, get stirred by what may seem the most trivial of matters.

This is why we so badly need spirits of humility and curiosity in our day because this is an adaptive reality and much of what we know won't work. The capacity to probe, to try something, to experience things we don't personally prefer that we hope will encourage people takes the spirits of humility and curiosity. Otherwise, we are stuck and have no future.

I'd like to teach you a word this morning, a word from the original language of the New Testament, the word *macrothumia*. It is ordinarily translated "patience," but patience doesn't really do it. The *makro* part of *macrothumia* has its equivalent in English, macro-, which means large or long, and the *thumia* part, from which we have words like thermal or thermodynamics. *Thumia* means heat, temper, anger. *Macrothumia* is literally a long temper – the exact opposite of a short temper. *Micro-thumia* would be a short-temper. The person who gets mad instantly over the most trivial matters. I was driving down a highway with a pickup truck in front of me when another pickup truck merged onto the highway and tried to occupy the same space as that occupied by the first pickup truck. The two trucks were side by side, each half in and half out of the lane. I could see the drivers lower their windows and offer various gestures of affection to one another. That was *microthumia* – short tempers. It's the instant mad over whatever.

While *macrothumia*, is the long-temper, patience, I've come to prefer to understand it as "the grace of getting along!" The grace of getting along is the quality of God-inspired self-restraint that treats people with love, dignity, and respect when we don't really prefer the path we are taking or they are taking. It's an essential quality for a family, or a church, or any group of people to have a healthy future.

I was in a grocery store, approached the checkout counters, and of course, I picked the shortest line. There was only one dear lady in front of me. The line for the cash register next to me had six people and the last person was my friend, Curt. I saw Curt see my short line and his long line and to encourage his heart, I thumbed my nose at him. The lady in front sees the amount due for her groceries and says, “I think I have exact change,” and proceeds, one item at a time, to slowly empty everything in her purse onto the counter. Meanwhile, everyone in Curt’s line checks out and as he reaches the door, he turns, catches my eye, thumbs his nose at me and says, “*Macrothumia!*” He was reminding me of the grace of getting along!

Our society today has lost the capacity for the “long-temper,” for the grace of getting along. Instead, we often react quickly, sometimes explosively, when we don’t like something that is going on. However, if we are in an adaptive reality, the only way forward is to trust God and try things, to experiment and probe. Some things will work and others won’t. It means some things won’t be what we prefer personally, but out of grace we accept it and move on together.

Today is the two-year anniversary of the day our associate pastor, our beloved David Jordan-Haas, went into the visible presence of Jesus. To be honest, I still cannot think about it without being messed up. I asked Connie if she

mindful if I spoke about him for a moment, but of course she loves to hear stories of her beloved David. I think of David like Nathaniel, the disciple whom Jesus described as one without guile. There is something rare and remarkable about David that made it easy to share one's deepest and personal thoughts. David's love for Connie, Julia, Drew, and Mary Grace was always on his sleeve. He would always tuck his young daughters in bed with the words, "You are greatly wanted and deeply loved." I preached several Easter Sundays in the Great Hall and David served as liturgist with me, but the last Easter I was here, we switched and he preached. My email to him the next day said, "An out-of-the-park word on Jesus is alive and our mega-joy. A pleasure to hear twice! Thank you, Jesus!"

Why talk about David? It's not to be maudlin, it's to be marvelin' at his life because David's life was the spirit of *macrothumia*, the grace of getting along, the grace of calling it good. A number of very difficult, very adaptive challenges rocked VPC during his years as an associate pastor, but I never saw David rocked. He trusted Jesus. He looked for fresh ways to respond to difficult, very adaptive situations. At times we ask, what would Jesus do? David did it. *Macrothumia* is about trusting Jesus, about calling it good when it's for the common good, even when it's not your preference. The grace of getting along is essential to the spirits of humility and curiosity!

Last week I invited you to consider doing one of two things. As the pandemic recedes, many people are still lonely, many people are not connected. You can make a difference. One way is to host Open Driveway Friday. From 7-9 p.m. on Friday, invite neighbors to drop over. Get a buddy to help you. A bit to drink. A few nibbles. Who cares if 2 or 20 come? Another way is to host backyard barbecue for your neighbors. Get a buddy to help. Keep it simple. Last Tuesday night I was in two Zoom meetings and after a long day, I was dragging. One of the people privately messaged me during those meetings to say, “Thanks for encouraging us to host a get-together with our neighbors. I’ve invited 23 families to our home on Friday. They were precious in their response. It will be outside.” I was thrilled. She and her husband got it. Touching people is not simply what happens in this building. It’s what happens when you open your life to people where you are, when you take the adventure the Lord has for you!

Let me close with this observation. In the middle of these adaptive days, I have talked with countless VPC people and found us to be a happy, healthy church. Do we have issues to resolve? Sure. Will we see precious people come and go? Of course. Is everyone happy? You have to be kidding! There are always issues. Yet, there is a wonderful spirit of expectation among us.

Once, when I was teaching a group in Fairhope, Alabama, I spoke with Carol Turner who attended a delightful church there, not far from beautiful sandy beaches. I asked, “Carol, how is your church doing?” She replied, “We’re bubbling!” “You’re bubbling? What do you mean?” She said, “It’s not the church programs per se. It’s when I bump into people at the grocery or at the high school football game or in fellowship hall there is an upbeat spirit that we love that God is doing wonderful things among us. We can’t wait to see what happens next. We’re bubbling!”

I’m educated enough to know that the Bible never uses the word bubbling in reference to the church. I’m smart enough to know that I want to be a part of a bubbling church – bubbling with the spirits of humility and curiosity of the people and bubbling with the presence of the Lord who loves us! And VPC is a-bubbling. There’s an old song, “Jesus’ love is a-bubbling over.” May we bubble with enthusiasm about what God is doing among us as part of the great adventure our Lord has for us, and in the midst of our adaptive challenges, may we have the spirits of curiosity and humility, and the maturity of macrothumia, the costly grace of getting along!