A high school student had earned and received a failing grade. The young man’s father wanted him to get into a top college and knew the bad grade could jeopardize this. His first reaction to the grade was to blame the teacher.

So he stormed into the teacher’s classroom and accused the teacher of being unfair. He even threatened to have the teacher’s job if she wouldn’t change the grade. The teacher, knowing the grade was fair, held her ground. She wouldn’t budge.

The father then went to the principal’s office where he complained the teacher was unfair. The principal, knowing the situation, backed up the teacher. He wouldn’t change the grade. The father got more and more angry and threatened to go to the school board. The situation escalated more and more, and finally the father paused slightly. In that silent pause, the principal observed calmly, “You must love your son very much.”

At that point, the father’s anger turned to tears and healing began. Because the principal, led by the Holy Spirit, refused to let himself get drawn into a contest of one upsmanship, and, instead, put the needs and feelings of the father first, this conflict ended well.

We have disagreements like this at church, too. Perhaps we’ve volunteered to lead a ministry and someone is unhappy about the way we’ve done things. Perhaps some of us don’t like an action taken by the vestry or the pastor, feeling it is unfair. Perhaps someone has not treated us as respectfully as we feel they should; perhaps they’ve broken a promise to us.

The Early Church had disagreements like that, too. Paul is writing to the church at Philippi to address a disagreement within that church – perhaps one between two matriarchs of the church who used to work well together but now are at odds. The whole church has taken sides around it – one supporting one woman, the other side supporting the other. Neither would back down, perhaps because of pride. They each were too much worried about their own standing and protecting themselves to see the feelings of the other. But Paul is encouraging them to realize that Jesus, although He was never wrong, emptied himself and came full of love into the world. Jesus cared more about loving us then He did about being right, then He did about being great, then He did about receiving all the bows and curtsies typical of a royal. Paul is calling these women – and all of us in the church throughout the ages – to put the needs and concerns of other’s first and give up the need to be right all the time ourselves. He’s calling these women, and all of us, to empty ourselves out of love, just as Jesus did.

Perhaps some of us remember something startling that happened at the National Book Awards in 1974, when poet Adrienne Rich received the award in a competition against two colleagues, Alice Walker and Andre Lorde. When she approached the podium, here is what she gave as her acceptance speech. “We, Andrew Lorde, Adrienne Rich and Alice Walker together, accept this award in the name of all women whose voices have gone out and still go out unheard in a patriarchal world.” The three had written this speech together, with the understanding that whoever won would read it. Each one emptied herself. Each one realized that they were all enriched because of the contributions of the others, all toward the same cause. Each of their voices became stronger in unity.

We Christians also are a stronger voice in the world through our unity.

Amen