

Living Like Jesus

We come to this morning to one of my favorite passages in this, one of my favorite books of the Bible. I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that, in seminary, I spent an entire semester studying the letter to the Philippians. Both of the substantive papers I wrote that semester came from a portion of the scripture with which we will engage this morning. This passage gives us the very heart of Paul's understanding of what it means to live the Christian life but, strangely, it does so in large part with words likely written by someone other than Paul. That key message, the specifics of how we are to pattern our lives after that of Jesus, came to my mind again and again during the last few days as I listened to the preaching, workshops and, yes, even the business sessions at the annual meeting of our Evergreen Association of American Baptist Churches. This powerful message of Paul is one that I come back to again and again in my own life, as I struggle with my own failings in being Christ-like and try to remember the heart of the Gospel as it guides me in my relationships with others.

Perhaps one of the things that appeals to me so deeply about this passage is that it resounds with echoes of what I've already mentioned as something that appeals to me so deeply about this whole book. The Letter to the Philippians is Paul's letter to friends, to a church that he founded and visited on multiple occasions. This is a church that has supported him in times of trouble, a church that has always taken his teaching seriously, and for these things he loves them especially. Remember the opening of the letter: "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now... God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus." Paul reveals more about his relationship with the Christians at Philippi in our passage this morning. He calls them beloved; he reminds them how they have always obeyed him; not just when he was there to watch over him but also when he was far away and could only hear reports about them from other travelers. He knows that they are bound together with the ties of love in Christ, that they are sympathetic to his troubles, that they have continued to be an encouragement to him. And so the opening of chapter two is a rhetorical question of sorts. Listen to verse one of chapter two in the Today's English Version, also known as "Good News for Modern Man": "Does your life in Christ make you strong? Does his love comfort you? Do you have fellowship with the Spirit? Do you feel kindness and compassion for one another?" Paul knows that he and the Philippians would agree that the answer to all these questions is "yes!" It's a slam dunk! So his request to them has all the force of a commandment: "Make my joy complete: be 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 regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

It's a nice piece of classical rhetoric: since we agree on x, therefore y. Of course we live in an age that distrusts rhetoric. In fact, it's become something of a dirty word, right along with "politicians," and the two words are often used in near conjunction. And the word we hear most in conjunction with rhetoric is the word empty, as in empty rhetoric. So we don't really want rhetoric to convince us, we want facts. Fortunately Paul gives us that as well. This way of life he's talking about, this putting others first, being humble, that, he says, was the way Jesus lived. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," he says and then he goes on to explain exactly what he means.

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The next five verses, six through eleven, are often known as the “Carmen Christi,” the hymn of Christ. Scholars have long believed that this is a quotation by Paul of a hymn with which the Philippians would have been familiar and one which was not written by himself. There are words in this segment which Paul uses only here and the tone of these five verses seems elevated above the affectionate familiarity of the rest of the letter. We may have here the first recorded instance of a preacher quoting from a popular song in order to make a point, a now common practice and one, as you well know, of which I am quite fond. I told you that “me and Paul” had a lot in common as regards this letter! We remember things we learn through songs, after all. That’s why we teach our children songs like “Jesus Loves Me” and “Jesus Loves the Little Children.” As I’ve visited with Rose Gunderson over the last few weeks, she’s mentioned to me on a couple of occasions how her father used to have their whole family sing “How Firm a Foundation” at dinner time when she was a child. She remembers both the tradition and its meaning some 90 years later. This weekend, at the annual meeting, there had apparently been some miscommunication and, although the worship service bulletin on Friday night listed hymnal numbers for the three hymns we sang, there were no hymnals in the pews. Nevertheless, most of us were able to sing “Breathe on Me, Breath of God,” “Blessed Assurance,” and “I Have Decided” with gusto. Those old hymns stick with you.

So what would the Philippians have remembered from this hymn Paul quotes and what can we learn from it? The first lesson should be obvious to us all: it tells in five short verses, just three sentences in our English translation, the whole story of Jesus, his nature, his obedience, his sacrifice, his glorious reward and the impact on all of creation. Let’s unpack this a little and pay special attention to some Greek words whose richness English does not quite catch.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.” What did it mean to the Philippians and to Paul when they sang that Jesus “was in the form of God”? We must be sure to understand that the word “form” here does not mean the same thing as, say, a concrete form. Jesus wasn’t simply of the same dimensions as God. Jesus was not a being created by God by pouring some human stuff into a mold that would look just like God when it set up. No, instead the Greek word here, μορφή, refers to the essential nature of Jesus. In his very being, Jesus was just like God. Robert Linthicum writes, “*Morphe* means the essential form which does not alter.” In other words, according to the hymn, Jesus didn’t just look like God, they shared the same essence. Jesus was the same as God in the most important way. He was, as we remember at Christmas, Emmanuel, God With Us.

“Though he was in the form of God, (he) did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.” If you look at the cover of your bulletin this morning, you’ll see the late Fr. Richard Lonsdale’s interpretation of this verse. Lonsdale uses a slightly different translation: “He did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped at.” Other than the dangling participle, this is a perfectly good rendering of a rather colorful Greek word. It is “ἄρπαγμος,” and it is variously translated as the act of seizing or robbery or the thing seized or stolen or something to be clutched and held onto. It comes from the Greek myth of the Harpies, do you know it? The Harpies were demons, with the faces of ugly old women and the bodies of birds, complete with sharp beaks and claws. In various myths, they are said to swoop down and snatch food or belongings or even people. No one could withstand them or retrieve their prey, except for two

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heroes in one story. Once a Harpy snatched something, it stayed snatched. But Jesus, who was of the same essence as God, willingly gave up his equality with God.

Instead, the hymn says, “(he) emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” That word, emptied or *εκενωσεν*, has given rise to whole theological systems. One may speak of the kenosis of Jesus or of Kenotic Theology. The word informs the Christian understanding that Jesus, the pre-existent Christ, poured out his divine nature to become fully and only human during his life on Earth. Robert Linthicum remarks that the word in its original use in Greek meant “pouring out the contents of a vessel and even shaking it after it has been emptied to be sure that every drop has come out of the vessel.” Instead of retaining his divine nature, Christ took the form, the essential nature, of a slave. No longer the Creator and King of the Universe, he became one at the beck and call of every other human, living a life of complete service, no matter what the cost.

And what a cost it was. “And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.” I’ve quoted here before from the great Roman orator Cicero: “How shall I describe crucifixion? No adequate word can be found to represent so execrable an enormity... Far be the name of the cross not only from the body, but even from the thought, the eyes, the ears of Roman citizens.” Even the Romans, whose Empire was so often preserved by keeping their subjects down by the use and threat of crucifixion, were horrified by the cruelty of this worst of torturous deaths. The thought that the One who created the universe should love us so much that he would willingly subject himself to such torture and pain in order to redeem us is almost unimaginable.

But of course, the story of Jesus the Christ does not end there. “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” The name above all names. What are we to make of this? There’s a sweet little chorus, “Jesus, Name Above All Names,” which is very popular in some Evangelical circles. Do any of you know it? “Jesus, name above all names/Beautiful Savior, Glorious Lord./Emmanuel, God is with us./Blessed Redeemer, Living Word.” It’s a lovely way to think about the many titles we give to Jesus but I have a very practical problem with the first line. Is “Jesus” the name above all names? Yeshua, or Joshua or Jesus, was an incredibly common name among the Jews of the First Century and it means, as I told the children earlier, “Yahweh saves.” And since Jesus had that name since he was born as an infant in Bethlehem, how can we say that he received it upon his exaltation after his self-sacrifice? No, the name above all names is the name that is represented in Scripture, in Hebrew, Greek, Latin and English, as “Lord.” Jesus is Lord; Jesus, in Latin, is *Domine*; in Greek, *Κυριος*; in Hebrew, *Adonai*, the respectful substitute word for Yahweh. Jesus is renamed by God for God Godself. Just a name? Hardly, for we must remember that in New Testament as well as Old Testament thought, the name of a person reveals the very nature of that person. Once again, Paul is telling us that Jesus is God.

It was a scandal to the Gentiles and a stumbling block to the Jews. How was a devout Jew to equate God, the God who is One, to a mere mortal? And for the Gentiles, the citizens and subjects of Rome, to proclaim anyone other than Caesar as Lord, as *Κυριος* or *Domine*, well,

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that was treason, punishable by death. Whoever wrote this hymn, whoever sung it, Paul, by quoting it, all of them were guilty of challenging the Empire, of daring to say that there was something more important than the predominant culture, something more powerful than the greatest superpower of the age. Is it any wonder that Paul advised the Philippians to “work out (their) salvation with fear and trembling”? After all, he is calling on them to take on everything that their neighbors valued with only their faith in Christ Jesus, their love for each other, and a sense of humility that would make them put the well-being of others above their own. Paul’s promise to them: “it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” God will give you the strength of will and of body to carry on.

It is a daunting prospect, isn’t it? It means setting ourselves against our culture which puts so much stock in pride and status. Instead, we are called to value humility and obedience, the hallmarks of Jesus’ life, death and ministry. The Nazarene theologian, Dennis Bratcher, writes: “Perhaps the Church needs to see itself in a new light. Maybe it needs to see itself less as the proclaimer and defender of divine truth, and more as the servant of humanity, the footwisher who expresses his love by humble service.” Bratcher goes on to cite Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German ethicist who was imprisoned and hung by the Nazis during World War II. In the collection of the letters and papers he wrote in prison, you may find these words from Bonhoeffer: “The church is the church only when it exists for others. . . . The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving. . . . It must not underestimate the importance of human example which has its origin in the humanity of Jesus.”

As I said at the outset, this passage and the crucial concepts contained in it came back to me again and again this weekend at the Evergreen meeting. From the very outset, as is so often the case with Evergreen gatherings, we were reminded to put the needs of others ahead of our own. In your bulletin this morning, you should have found a bookmark from Evergreen, with our association’s mission statement on one side and “Respect Communication Guidelines” on the other. Those guidelines, a rough acrostic spelling “Respect,” are meant to guide our every conversation at these meetings and we do, honestly, a variable job but we’re still working at it and we’re getting better every year, I think. Having these guidelines in front of us is a great way of reminding us to stay humble and to give others the priority. I encourage you to take these bookmarks home, to read them and think about them, and to use them regularly to remind you to think about Christ-like interpersonal behavior.

I am also always reminded of the importance of Paul’s teaching by the very nature of the Evergreen Association. By committing to decision-making by consensus, we do not allow any decision to be rammed through against real opposition. Every question of substance must receive at least a basic level of support from every member attending. Our “Consensus Building Primer” lists the minimum acceptable level of consensus that must be given by every member as “Agreement with serious questions but will not block the group moving forward.” If even one member cannot reach that level of consensus, the question must be deferred for more study or reworking or abandoned entirely. It sounds unworkable, until you remember how committed we are to hearing each other and putting each other’s needs above our own desires. And by our organization into ethnic caucuses, I am continually reminded that the current dominant culture, of which I am, generally speaking, a member, has a long history of using power to keep those not

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like us in a subordinate position. I, as an ordained man of predominantly European descent, hold an advantage over laity, women and especially persons of color, even if I am not aware of it. I cannot simply ignore that privileged status and assume it will go away. I must consciously act in ways that give power to those who see me as more powerful than they. It helps when I have role models in Evergreen such as Rev. Robert Jeffries, pastor of New Hope Baptist Church in whose beautiful facility we met. Pastor Jeffries, a greatly respected and successful leader in Seattle's African-American community met with some of us to talk about the creation care programs his church supports. His attitude throughout was one of humility, as he confessed to mistakes made in the programs and especially by himself. And I don't have to tell most of you about the loving, generous and humble attitude of Rev. Peter Koshi, former chair of Evergreen and interim pastor here, who is always delighted to puncture the well-deserved reverence with which he is treated in Evergreen.

And so, my sisters and my brothers, I call on you, as I am called, to "do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of (us) look not to (our) own interests, but to the interests of others." It will not be easy. We will have to work out this part of our salvation in fear and trembling. But we will succeed in the long run, if we open our lives to God, in order that God may "work in (us), enabling (us) both to will and to work for God's good pleasure." And as we work, let us focus on the one who received the name above all names, Jesus our Lord, and on what he did that caused God to exalt him so. For however we call on him, as *Κυριος*, as *Adonai*, or simply as Jesus, he indeed is the hope of earth and the joy of heaven.