

“This Is the Way”

Philippians 2:5-11

Some congregations alas are so contentious and full of strife and bickering that a pastor is lucky to escape. But the Philippian church was not like this! So why is Pastor Paul concerned?

A pastor loves being the shepherd of a flock that is *happy*, that takes its food without complaining, that romps playfully in the meadows of peace and tranquility, and that gets along with other like-minded folks.

This is pertinent because, of all the churches to which Pastor Paul writes, the church at Philippi was, without a doubt, the congregation that gave him the most pleasure. Philippi, after all, was the site of his first European convert. It was the place where he and his companion Silas were unfairly imprisoned and where the jailer and his family were converted.

Today’s reading is from a letter to this beloved congregation — a very personal and touching note, all the more poignant because he is writing while wearing an ankle bracelet at the request of the *magistrate* of Rome, the Eternal City, the imperial capital. Pastor Paul clearly has a bond with these people that he doesn’t have with, say, those bickering and snickering, contentious and licentious Christians at Corinth.

But the seven verses of the lesson also suggest that there’s a small concern that Pastor Paul needs to address, and in this short text, the so-called “apostle to the Gentiles” lays it on the line. He has to speak frankly, as we pastors sometimes need to do. When you’re close to a church family, when you love these people as you love your own family, you are very sensitive to undercurrents of dissension — to even the slightest disturbance and distraction.

Pastor Paul saw and heard some stuff that he didn't like. We know for certain that two influential women in the church, who had labored beside Paul "in the work of the gospel" were not "of the same mind" (see 4:2-3). He addresses it head-on in this reading. In verse 4, he uses two imperatives: *regard* and *look*. Regard others as better than yourselves, he warns, and look to the interests of others as though they were your own interests.

He cites the example of Jesus Christ himself, and in so doing, formulates an astonishing description of the eternal Christ in his pre-body existence as God and nothing but God. This text, the annual Palm Sunday reading, is a schematic of the life of Christ for the next five days of Holy Week, culminating in the awful, state-sponsored murder of the one person who offered humanity its only chance of redemption. These verses tell us how this week is going to play out. And for a while, it's going to be ugly.

But then, as we know, there is a reversal of fortunes. The victim emerges victorious. He is exalted, invested with a new name, knees are bowing, and all of creation is confessing that "Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God, the Father" (v. 11).

Today's reading is the great "self-emptying" passage of Philippians and the New Testament. This idea is derived from the language in verses 5 and 6: "Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but *emptied* himself ..." (emphasis added.)

This is insanely mysterious and super-awesome, and no human intelligence can claim to know, let alone understand, what was said in the divine conversations that resulted in the decision to incarnate God. When it was all said and done and the cosmic dust had settled, God decided that God did not need to be *just* God.

Therefore, God willingly “emptied himself” so that the Being formerly known as God and God alone was now also known as a child in Bethlehem with the name of Jesus!

This Jesus, Paul says, had existed as God and God alone. Now he was completely Other, a combo God/Mortal, and, as such, this person, both human and divine, serves as an example for those times when *we’re going to need to do some self-emptying ourselves*.

In verses 5-8, Pastor Paul says that the eternal Christ:

- divests himself of the need to be only God in order to also be a human;
- discards the need to be Lord of all to become Servant of all;
- discards his exalted rank to assume a humble one; and
- discards his eternity as God to submit to death as a mortal.

In other words, the eternal Christ set aside just about everything that would identify him as a deity who was present at creation, in whom all things held together, and went tripping down the path into the mess that had been made of the human experience. He humbled himself in the way that a billionaire who made her money in tech apps might be humbled if she lost all her money and became a box handler on the line at an Amazon fulfillment center.

Yet the transition from glory to gore was even more profound than this. A billionaire who becomes a box handler is still a human after this shocking tumble down the economic ladder. Her new condition is just a difference in rank, social standing or access to ready cash. When the eternal Christ became a human, this involved a ginormous change. Christ became someone or something he’d never been before and would henceforth never cease to be.

There was no going back. God had now morphed into a human known as Jesus, while retaining his divinity. It was an unprecedented union of the divine and human.

This, then, concludes a brief history of eternal time in which God became a human, a story to which Pastor Paul alludes in his efforts to encourage the Philippian Christians to make his joy complete (v. 2), and “to be of the same mind ... that was in Christ Jesus” (v. 5).

How, then, does the Christ-centered verses 6-8 help the Philippians — and us — to “be of the same mind,” to “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,” to regard each other in humility “as better than” ourselves, and to “look not to [our] own interests, but to the interests of others”? Let’s take a look.

You would think a person who was a human with some very special superpowers would have a hard time relating to mere mortals.

But not so. Jesus was an extraordinary fellow while growing up. He was like “young Sheldon” in the temple at the age of 12, schooling gray-bearded Sadducees, Pharisees and scribes. He gave his mother a lot to think about. But he worked with his earthly father in his carpenter shop, perhaps in the way that Clark Kent worked on the farm and in the family store in Smallville, Kansas.

Jesus did not go out of his way to use his superpowers — the “water-into-wine” episode, hogs into the sea, occasional exorcism, and calming of storms on the sea notwithstanding.

Jesus knew how to work with his hands. He perspired in Joseph’s shop. He felt the oppression of the Romans who supported client kings in the area and occupied Palestine, a buffer state between Egypt and Syria.

As a young man, he was well-liked, and no doubt most people in Nazareth thought he was a boy with prospects. He would make his mom and dad proud.

When he started his ministry, he met the first of his disciples at the job site: a harbor at or near Tiberius. Some fishermen were mending their nets. He said, “Follow me,” and they did. They stayed with him for three years. Others became part of this circle, including women. He scarcely had a place to call home. Sometimes he didn’t know where he was going to put up for the night. He washed the feet of the disciples before having a meal.

The Bible says that he suffered temptation, just as humans do: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

The text emphasizes Jesus’ humanity: “in human likeness ... in human form” (v. 7). Jesus did not use his superpowers or his divine “otherness” to elevate himself above others. He was fully human, and this is how he was viewed by his intimates and the public.

This is a key point: in our dealings with others, especially those of the “household of faith,” *we must always have regard for the humanness of others.*

Although the Declaration of Independence asserts that “all men are created equal,” we know that we’re all very unequal in many ways. What this article of independence did not clarify sufficiently is that we are all *equal in our humanity.*

Jesus stepped into our humanness. He occupied a body. He felt human pain. He experienced temptation. He knew disappointment and sorrow. He cried real tears when his friends died, or when so many turned away.

Jesus empathized. He had compassion for others that was so strong, it twisted his gut. He got physically ill.

This, then, *is the example he sets for our interaction with others*. We will remember their humanity. Before starting a fight with the neighbors, we will remember that we have not walked in their shoes. Before being judgmental, we will give others the benefit of the doubt. Before doing something hurtful, we will remember to perform an act of kindness. We will always be looking for ways to put the interests of others ahead of our own.

This is the Jesus way. This is the way. This is what Jesus' self-emptying has taught us. We all have this in common: we are humans, bearing the *imago Dei*, the image of God.

Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" (v. 7).

Slaves in the Roman empire didn't have a lot of self-esteem as a rule. True, some slaves occupied powerful positions in the homes of Roman families. Such a slave might function as a manager of household finances, or as a tutor, for the family's children. But a slave was a slave. He or she was property and bound to the master by law. Penalties were severe if a slave ran away. He was bound to be obedient to his master.

Do we really think of Jesus as a slave?

If issued a direct command from a Roman officer, Jesus likely would have complied. Remember his controlled behavior with Herod and Pilate during his sham of a trial.

But in his day-to-day life, although Jesus didn't look like a slave, he acted as though he existed to serve others. He tried to explain this to the disciples. He didn't ask his followers to think of themselves as maids or butlers.

Jesus never asks us to despise ourselves — just to honor others. “Servants focus on others, not themselves,” says pastor Rick Warren. “This is true humility: not thinking less of ourselves but thinking of ourselves less.” This is the Way.

In this way, Pastor Paul the apostle makes it plain. Please have the mind of Christ, he writes. Jesus took on the form of a servant. Jesus himself urged his disciples to be servant leaders: “The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves” (Luke 22:26). This is the Way.

Jesus himself explicitly identifies his mission as one of service: “Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28, NIV).

Here again, this is the Jesus way. This is what Jesus’ self-emptying has taught us. We must be servants.

If you give your life to save the life of a friend or family member, that is *love*. Jesus said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s *friends*” (John 15:13).

The Bible says, “Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners” (Romans 5:7-8, NLT).

What kind of love is this when someone will die for strangers and sinners?

What kind of love is this when millions of Ukrainians have fled their homes and thousands of Ukrainians have died standing up for us to an evil tyrant.

Pastor Paul himself died in the service of his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He often referred to himself as a slave or servant of Jesus Christ. He rejoiced to participate — even in a small manner — in the sufferings of Christ in an after-the-fact sort of way. How could he complain when Christ had suffered so much?

Now, in today's epistle reading, he reminds two women and the rest of the Philippian Christians of the same thing. Jesus “humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross” (v. 8).

Once again, this is the Jesus way. Jesus' self-emptying has taught us that:

- We all are one in our humanity.
- We are called to be servants.
- We must not be afraid to suffer.

Following Jesus' example, we will be able to “be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” This is the Way

May the peace of God . . .

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