

A Sermon for DaySpring
By Donna Lee Lamothe
Filled With Humility - Emptied of Self
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Philippians 2:1-13

Introduction

It's my pleasure to be with you today, alongside all those who have ministered so beautifully to us in music, read our Scriptures, and facilitated our time together in a myriad of ways. One of the things I love about our church is the welcome, the beckoning even, for all of us to participate in serving God and each other.

As we participate together in worship here today, we're recognizing the final Sunday in what's known worldwide as the season of creation in our Christian calendar. We, here, are united in spirit and purpose with people of different denominations, different countries, holding services in different time zones and languages, all drawing attention to this season of creation.

I think the timing of this final Sunday is particularly good – because like any good series, the season finale is also a prelude. A prelude to a great event. Next weekend is Canadian Thanksgiving! I am a Canadian, and for those of you here who have lived in Canada, you would know that yes, there is such a thing!

As the season of creation ends with the feast of St. Francis on Thursday, it picks up with Thanksgiving weekend on Friday! Next week some of my family members will be devouring the mashed potatoes, mashed rutabaga, roast turkey and apple pie that God and the good earth has provided. They'll of course send pictures of tables loaded with my favorite things on them, and that I can almost smell and taste, but not quite. I will wait patiently for American Thanksgiving to come to Waco, in November.

But for now, would you scroll back with me to consider another community, in another country and another time.

Philippians 2 is the continuation of a letter to the people and church that Paul dearly loved but could not be present with. These were people he was thinking of, worrying about, and praying for with joy.

Surely Paul was thinking of his good friend Lydia, and her household. He remembers their baptisms. I think he's imagining the children, all on their best behavior for church - maybe they collected the offering there too.

But Paul can't be with them. He is in prison for his faith. So he writes.

And we ask, is the letter really to the Philippians, or is to us? All these years later it is all too relevant, all too challenging.

But Paul starts with the easy part of this correspondence and so will we. In chapter 2 of Philippians, Paul shares his good assumption about the church.

Since (v. 1-2)

In verses 1-2 Paul says that “if” or “since” there is any comfort in Christ, consolation from love, partnership in the Spirit of God, tender affection and sympathy, his friends in Christ would surely make his joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, unified in spirit.

He believes that his friends have received some profound gifts from their faith and fellowship.

In a season of difficulty as a church, when they have grieved for Paul and for the persecution and suffering of others amongst them, they’ve also experienced the mysterious and mighty comfort of Christ.

They have been consoled by the love extended within their community of faith. Some translations read this consolation of love as coming from Christ. I think Paul wants us to see consolation coming from both Christ and the community, inseparable, tender and powerful.

So with all of those things filling the wells of their souls, comfort in Christ, consolation from love, partnership in the Spirit of God, tender affection, and sympathy, Paul calls for a reasonable outcome. He calls for their like-mindedness, love, unity in spirit and mind.

Maybe you’ve heard the expression, “what is down in the well comes up in the bucket.”

I think that’s what Paul is thinking in a nutshell.

We understand that principle, right?

I make a mean banana bread. Rick mashes the ripe bananas just so, and I add all the other ingredients. When Rick’s ingredients and my ingredients are blended together and placed in that oven, the outcome - is pure goodness. Thanksgiving-worthy goodness.

Could a lot of things prevent goodness from emerging? Fair question. I could spill my batter all over the place and just end up with a mess. I could forget to turn on the oven and have cold mush. I could leave it in the oven too long and burn it up.

Paul knows all too well that things can go wrong in a faith community, even when there are good ingredients coming together. Even when there is good water in the well. I think we know that too. So Paul will guide us 2 steps further.

After rehearsing the good foundations of the Philippian community, he’ll give 2 more instructions.

He’ll call for the Philippians to be filled with humility and emptied of self.

Filled with Humility (v. 3, 6-8)

First, Philippians 2:3 tackles their need, our need, to be filled with humility.

v. 3 - We're to do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than ourselves.

Yes, in humility, regard others as better than ourselves.

Paul will define that right away, by pointing to the ultimate example of the one who has done it. He'll describe what would not have occurred in the wildest imagination of a polytheistic Greco-Roman citizen - a God who would descend to earth, to take on a human nature.

Paul describes Jesus: though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped,⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of – wait for it – not just a human, but a slave!

the paradox stretches our imagination as far as it will go and then beyond, when we're reminded that Jesus death was on a cross.

Jews considered everyone hung on a cross cursed. Jews and Gentiles alike knew that citizens could not be crucified, that is was a punishment reserved only for slaves. The ancient historian Josephus called it "the most wretched of deaths."

A crucified God - in a culture that was obsessed with honor.

But could it be that the Kingdom of God is an upside-down kingdom where the greatest is the least and the least is the greatest?

Could it be that the nature of God is consistent with the nature of a servant?

The apostles Matthew and Mark thought so.

Mt 20:28/Mark 10:45 both tell us exactly the same thing: "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many."

Our path to God will not go around, go over, or go under the trail of humility that was Christ's own path to the Cross. Our salvation comes through faith in the humble, obedient, crucified and resurrected Saviour.

Perhaps this rightly shocks you. Or perhaps this is all too familiar to you, in which case, I invite you to let the weight of it fall again.

And as it does, to consider any contrast with our lives. To consider the contrast in a culture of people prone to elevating either ourselves or one another, as a norm.

It's pretty tough not to be tempted to follow popular personalities rather than a crucified Christ, be they preachers, politicians, musicians, entertainers or athletes.

Listen to this contemporary warning. It is a hard word for us here in the US.

Pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, in the shadow of the third Reich and the rise of Hitler: “Every personality cult that is concerned with important qualities, outstanding abilities, strengths and the talents of someone else – even though these may be thoroughly spiritual in nature – is worldly and has no place in Christian community.”

He’s warning us to beware of a celebrity culture that elevates select people over others.

Author Frank Thielman suggests “if we are to put the interests of others ahead of our own, we must relinquish our fascination with personalities, including our own, and get busy with the unimpressive task of helping our brothers and sisters in their points of need.”

Yes, get busy with the unimpressive task of helping our brothers and sisters in need.

This morning we prayed Psalm 25 together, asking for God to guide and teach us. God reminds us a little further along, in verse 9, that he leads the humble in what is right and teaches the humble his way.

When we are humble and teachable, we expand our capacity for God.

So we seek to be filled with humility

And if we are going to make more room to be filled with the humility of Christ, we’ll need to empty out some other things.

Emptied of Self (v. 4, 6-8)

Paul’s description of Christ in Philippians 2:7 tells us that Christ emptied himself

Filled with humility we empty ourselves.

It is a *“less of me and more of you”* attitude.

Paul says: Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others.

While there are a multitude of directions we could go with that, we’ll consider what that means for creation.

St. Francis of Assisi, from the 12 and 13th centuries, joins in with voices today, calling for us to look out for the interests of others though our regard for creation.

He models a concern for others as a concern for all living things.

Franciscans understood the incarnation of Christ to be the greatest possible expression of humility and love of others.

They remind us that the incarnation was not an afterthought, but that the earth was intended to be an environment worthy of receiving Christ.

Christ drank the earth's water and ate what grew from its soil. His blood fell to the ground and became one with it. And if Christ did not reject his material body and a material world, neither can we.

So Franciscans, imitating Christ, took only what was essential from their surroundings. If they just needed one branch of a tree for its wood, they didn't level a forest, or even cut down the whole tree, but used only the branch.

Because of their regard for their surroundings and their understanding of living relationships, there are still trees in the forests of Assisi, the place they called home. Some of you have walked in the shade of those trees, taken in their beauty, and seen the creatures things they still sustain.

Is it possible that in our North American pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness our entitlement to personal happiness comes at a great cost to others? Especially the poor and the earth?

When we need a branch are we levelling a forest? When we need a resource hidden deep in the earth do we remove an entire mountain top to seize it? Sadly, the answer is YES.

I am asking myself what my excess costs other people and other living things.

Rainey, who is part of our college spiritual formation class, shared her concern for an industrial strip in Louisiana called Cancer Alley. Awareness and compassion for others is a strength of many of our youngest adults. With a heavy heart, Rainey spoke of a community of chemical plants that is known to cause toxic air and premature deaths amongst residents, who don't have the economic means to leave.

When the earth is misused and misappropriated, so too are the humans dependent on it. This was the cry of the prophets of old.

What restraint is necessary?

Christ had the ability and even the right to grasp and exploit his Father's privilege and status because he was one with God. He could have come in opulence. But he came in poverty. He shows us the way of restraint.

I imagine Christ with his arms outstretched on the cross, and at the same time holding back legions of white knuckled angels straining to intervene in the spiritual realm.

Christ, though he existed in the form of God, (he) did not regard equality with God something to be grasped, seized, taken, exploited

What does our excess cost someone else? What does it cost the earth?

Emptying ourselves means asking and answering these questions, in light of our passage today.

The portion of Scripture in Philippians chapter 2, verses 6-11, is often referred to as a hymn, something that would have been known and sung in the first churches. So it's appropriate that we'll finish our consideration of how we can be filled with humility and emptied of self, with a song that you might know.

Amy Grant recently released *Trees We'll Never See*. She sings us an image of her mother planting oak trees. Her mom is working in the heat and the dirt, to plant trees under whose shade she'll never sit. Trees whose oxygen she will never breathe.

But there will be another generation that will sit in the shade of those trees and drink in the oxygen they will produce. And that is the reason she works and sweats and plants.

Looking to the interests of others. Others she may never know.

So let's throw at least some level of caution to the wind. Will you live a little on the wild side, imitating a Savior who has the nature and form of both God and servant?

Could we give generously and selflessly with no personal benefit in mind: to someone else, to our church building, to the world?

Could we use restraint? Consume less. Heal rather than harm.

When we are filled with humility and emptied of self it is possible.

Conclusion

Last week Pastor Eric spoke about the generosity of God. He used the same image that I saw as I was preparing this message. So I'll take that as an image from the Spirit to toss back out for us today.

Rather than living with a closed fist, seizing our rights, and looking out for ourselves over and above others, let's open our palms to be filled with humility and emptied of self.

May we now share in the Lord's supper together, coming with open hands to receive the elements and to be filled with humility and emptied of self in the way of Christ.