

Philippians 2:1-13

Paul was first and foremost a pastoral theologian. He was preoccupied with the spread of the gospel, mainly through the vitality of the communities of believers scattered throughout the Roman world. That was the lens through which he looked when he reflected on the story of Christ's death and resurrection.

Paul is writing to the Philippians – a congregation precious to him – people who have supported him and his ministry, even in his present situation in prison. The Philippians are concerned for Paul's safety and survival, since many people did not survive Roman prisons. Their concern, however, goes beyond just personal concern about the possible loss of a friend. The Greek term *koinōnia*, is used to define the relationships within the communities of believers and is often translated as fellowship or "sharing." It is actually a term found in Roman commercial law, where it is like the English word "partnership," and the legal provision was that if any party to the partnership were to die, the entire enterprise would be dissolved. The danger that Paul (or his companions Timothy or Epaphroditus) might die, threatened the entire ministry in Philippi.

The fact that commercial law figures in the Philippians' framework for understanding life, including the community of believers, suggests that they are a community of some means. Economic poverty does not seem to be an issue in Philippi, as it was in so many other communities where

Paul's churches were located. The Philippians even sent financial aid to the church in Jerusalem. The Christians in Philippi were, however, suffering at the hands of "opponents," and had been for some time. Some members of the congregation, were apparently at odds, and their disagreements were affecting the rest of the congregation. So, economically secure, the congregation seemed to be suffering in other ways.

The church at Philippi was the first church Paul founded in Europe. So, his relationship with the church at Philippi was warm and cordial. His initial success there was fondly recalled by Paul, and this church continued to support Paul in his missionary efforts. It is this warm relationship between the Philippian church and Paul, and his portrayal of himself as the faithful servant of God who suffers and rejoices as we heard last week. He choice the path of service to others, that provides the backdrop for Paul to address the needs and concerns of the church at Philippi. Paul begins addressing practical concerns relating to the life of the community of faith at Philippi. The emphasis on being "steadfast in the spirit" and "struggling together with one mind" for the sake of the gospel suggests that the unity of the community needs some strengthening.

The Imitation of Christ, a book likely written by Thomas à Kempis in the early fifteenth century, is widely held to be the most popular and influential book of all time outside the Bible. The author provides a

devotional reflection on how to pursue true understanding and holiness – by modelling oneself after the character and life of Jesus. Kempis describes the realization of the highest goal in words that reflect the letter to the Philippians:

“To account nothing of one's self, and to think always kindly and highly of others, this is great and perfect wisdom.”

Like *The Imitation of Christ*, Paul looks to the story of Jesus for the pattern of Christian living. In this letter, Paul portrays the story of Jesus in the adaptation of an early Christian hymn in order to capture and transform the imagination of his readers. By using this well known and beloved hymn of the congregation in delivering his own message, he tries to *show* rather than *tell* what it is to imitate Christ.

Known as the Kenosis hymn from the Greek “he emptied” – it is divided into two sections: the first tells what Jesus did for humanity and the second tells what God did for Jesus. The movement of these sections may be explained by following three key verbs: First – Jesus *emptied* himself: “He gave up his divine privileges and took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being;” Then, Jesus *humbled* himself: “When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on a cross;” Finally, God *has exalted* him: “God elevated him to the place of highest honour and gave him the name above all other names.”

Imitating Jesus does not only mean to follow his example of humility, but also to follow his example in exaltation. It is God who makes the promotion, not Jesus himself. So Paul's audience need not be concerned with self-promotion, but with God's promotion of them. James expresses a similar point:

"Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you."

Paul defines *"he emptied himself"* not by what Jesus gave up, but by what he took on. That is, Jesus emptied himself not by divesting himself of equality with God, but by assuming the form of a servant. The pre-existent, divine Jesus did not consider his status to be a reason to avoid the incarnation, but rather to embrace it. True humility meant using his status not for exploitation but for self-sacrificial service to others. Ultimately, Jesus' humility took him to the cross where he demonstrated the magnitude of his love for others.

In the Gospel of John, Philip asks Jesus to show them the Father, and Jesus answers, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." The Kenosis hymn suggests that Jesus' revelation of God is most obvious in his humility and death.

So Paul instructs the Philippians to act with humility and to consider others in their community as more important than themselves. Paul connects his readers to the story of Jesus. "You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had." Paul calls on the community to imitate

Christ as individuals living among one another. Paul aims to form a collective mind that informs collective actions.

Today some may consider a collective mind to be a bad idea. Social psychologist Irving Janis coined the word "Groupthink" in 1972, to describe the phenomenon in which group pressure results in flawed or senseless decisions that may hurt others. Paul calls for a different kind of Groupthink; a community of people who exhibit a transformed mind by following Jesus' example of humility and service to others.

Paul envisions the life of the community being formed by the mind of Christ – by a spirit of humility and loving service to one another rather than competition and grasping for power and control. Having the mind of Christ ought to shape not only the internal life of a congregation, but its relationship with its community and the world. While some may mourn the passing of "Christendom" and the waning influence of the church in society, Paul calls us to relinquish our grasping for worldly power and embrace the role of servant. Power struggles and pining for glory do not honour the name of Jesus. Rather, by following Jesus in identifying with the lowly and giving ourselves away in humble service to a suffering world, we honour "the name that is above every name."

Now some people say the following story happened this way and some people say it happened that way. Others say it didn't happen at all. But this way is the way I heard it and would like to share it with you ...

Once, in a small village in Germany, during the 15th century, there were two brothers. Both loved to draw and paint and when both were older they wanted to study to become artists. The brothers knew their parents wouldn't be able to afford to send them to art school so they reached an arrangement. The younger brother agreed to work while the older brother went to school. Then, when the older brother graduated an artist, he would work while the younger brother went to school. So it was that Albrecht Dürer went to art school for 5 years while his younger brother worked tirelessly in the mines to pay for his education.

When Albrecht returned home from his studies, everyone in the house greeted him warmly and was excited to see what great art he would produce. But he said, "No, I have made a promise. I will work until my brother has gone through school." Just then, Albrecht noticed his brother crying. "What's wrong?" he asked, "Are you not excited to begin your studies?"

Albrecht's younger brother held up his hands. They were swollen and crooked from years of hard manual labour. "Brother," he said, "I have worked my fingers to the bone so you could study art under the great masters. So much so that my hands are bent and arthritic. They can no longer hold a paint brush or a pencil without shaking. You will have to make great art for the both us."

Albrecht Dürer would certainly go on to make great art, but the piece he

is perhaps most famous for is a drawing he did of his brother's hands: swollen and bent, held palm to palm in a posture of worship. He titled it "hands" but to the world, they are known as "The Praying Hands," a well known work of art. My grandmother gave me a needlepoint work of the hands.

Later in his letter, Paul tells the Philippians that he wants to send Timothy to them because "I have no one else like Timothy, who genuinely cares about our welfare. All the others care only for themselves and not for what matters to Jesus Christ." Timothy could have pulled rank as Paul's right-hand man and sought his own welfare. But Timothy knew what it meant to imitate Jesus by not insisting on his own interests but acting in humility and service to others.

Like Timothy and like Paul's readers, leaders and members of our congregations are called to imitate Jesus by refusing to insist on their own prerogatives or status, and by serving others in humility.

This embodied "Christ-mindedness" took Christ and would take the Philippians on a path contrary to the wisdom of the world in which they operated. The first imperative Paul directs to the Philippian community concerns proper Christian lifestyle. Paul departs from his usual vocabulary and uses a technical word that means "to discharge one's obligation as a citizen" or "to fulfill one's obligation to the community." The Philippians were proud of their status as Roman citizens, their city

being a Roman colony, and would clearly understand Paul's call to fulfill societal obligations. But Paul is not calling them simply to be good citizens. He is calling them to fulfill their obligations to the Christian community. The result created would be a unity of spirit, mind, and purpose.

This call to proper citizenship in the gospel is reinforced by the love, compassion, and sense of community that come from Christ and are used as a basis for a renewed appeal for unity (the same mind-set, the same love, united in spirit, of one purpose). The problem in the Philippian community is finally revealed to be selfishness and arrogance. Internal dissension is threatening the love, unity, and fellowship of the community. While the cause is not revealed, the solution is understood by Paul to be a proper ordering of one's life.

Priorities need to be made according to a set of values that places the welfare and interests of others above concern for self; a humility arising from the very nature of being Christian. This would have two implications: the Philippians would fulfill their obligations to the community of faith as citizens of the heavenly kingdom, and the community itself would be built around a set of values and concerns far different from the rest of the world.

Paul argues that to fulfill one's obligation as a citizen of the heavenly kingdom is to empty oneself as Christ did, and to take on the role of a

servant. One must commit oneself not only to sharing grace but also to suffering. S/he must be willing to be "poured out" in the service of others, to have a mind-set and lifestyle that is different from the values of the world. S/he must exhibit true humility, understanding that to be "in Christ" means to be a servant because Christ came to the world, not as Lord but as Servant!

The Kenosis Hymn functions as an ethical example, an illustration of what Christian citizenship means. Unity comes in serving God through service to each other. There is danger of selfishly looking out for one's own interests at the expense of others, or of arrogance born of pride in one's status, birth, or achievements. The solution to problems in interpersonal relationships is an attitude of humble commitment to others. A spirit of self-sacrifice is an expression to others – of the love exemplified in Christ, love that was "obedient unto death, even a death on the cross!" And Paul himself bears witness that he himself is walking the path of servanthood, perhaps to his own cross. And he calls the Philippians to follow!

The Church today is beset by petty quarrels and selfish attitudes not unlike the churches of Paul's day. There are conflicts between larger branches of Christianity (Catholic vs Protestant), between denominations (Baptist vs Methodist), and between groups within denominations (moderate vs fundamentalist). But there are also conflicts within local churches on all political (pastor-church board), economic (businessman-

welfare mother), social (executive-labourer), racial (black-white), and personal (Smith-Jones) levels.

One local church board scrapped a successful busing program for underprivileged children because the bus was bringing children who were poor and of the "wrong" colour into their affluent suburban church. "We can't afford it! They don't pay their way," one said. "They're ruining our carpet," said another. Still another, "They're not like us. Don't they have their own church?"

Another church, claiming they could not possibly pay their excessively high \$18,000 mission and educational budget because of the tight economy, spent nearly \$20,000 to refurbish the church offices and landscape the grounds. "We must maintain our image in the community," they said.

Still another church nearly disbanded because of a severe conflict between opposing groups over how the worship service should be conducted. "It doesn't fit our needs. There needs to be more freedom," one group said. "We've never done it that way," another group said.

The examples are endless. To persons with these attitudes Paul points to the example of Christ, who traded His exalted position for the role of a servant, eventually to give His life for others. "Look at the servant-Christ," Paul says, "and be like that!"

The Church needs the unity of mind and purpose to which Paul is calling the Philippians. 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.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who poured out his own life at the hands of the Nazis because he refused to allow the church to be the tool of oppression, wrote: "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."

We who profess holiness need the unity of mind and purpose to which Paul is calling the Philippians. We need to see ourselves in terms of our obligations to the community of those "in Christ" of which we claim to be a part. Maybe we need to see ourselves less in terms of "those who never sin" and more in terms of "those who serve," those to whom Jesus commanded, "Take up [your] cross, and follow Me." Maybe we need to see ourselves in terms of the Servant-Christ, the "man for others" who bends himself to struggle for the wholeness and healing of a wounded world." Maybe we need to re-examine our own value structures that have been so subtly shaped by the success-oriented society around us.

We need to see if we are acting in a manner worthy of the heavenly citizenship we claim. For Paul, to claim that citizenship meant to have a mind-set different from others.

We live in a society dominated by rights-activism, permeated with the philosophy of "me first," and moulded by the corporate ideals of efficiency and success. The Church must be called to remember that demanding one's rights and privileges may be popular, even necessary in some cases, but if it does so at the expense of Christian unity and love, it is not Christian! The Body of Christ needs to be called upon to refocus on Christian humility, unity, and fellowship. We need to make service to others, perfect love in action, our primary responsibility. An attitude of Christlike humility does not demand rights or protect its own interests; it seeks servanthood.

C. C. Meigs expressed this attitude in the song "Others:"

*Others, Lord, yes others!
Let this my motto be!
Help me live for others,
That I may live for Thee!*

Idealistic? Yes. But then, so was Paul as he quoted the Kenosis Hymn to the Philippians from his jail cell, challenging them and challenging us to live its message!

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God of love, with praise we celebrate Jesus, who humbled himself so that every knee should bend and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Amen.