

Humbled and Hopeful

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Philippians 2: 1-11

2 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

This is the word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

Abraham Lincoln once said, "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had absolutely no other place to go."¹

I know that feeling and I bet you do, too.

¹ Travis, Douglas. Homiletical Essay. Feasting on the Word, Year 1, Vol 2. p.175.

Sometimes it's because of the mundane — being stretched thin by demands on my time and energy.

But weeks like this it is because of intractable conflicts, unthinkable brutality, and self-serving dysfunction of our world.

I feel helpless, hopeless, uncertain of what to do.

This week, as I saw damning videos of Hamas terrorists massacring innocents and capturing hostages, as I heard the cries of Jewish brothers and sisters whose worst fears appear to be coming true, as I looked at heart-wrenching images of parents carrying children down rubble-strewn streets, I have found myself praying simply: "Lord, help. Please help."

Throughout time, people of faith have found themselves in moments when they don't know what to do, when their backs are against the wall, when they are blood-stained and heart-broken.

Always, in those moments it is helpful to find our way back to the core of our faith. To the truth around which we are formed and which we gather: The Good News that Christ died and was raised to new life.

The apostle Paul was a master of finding his way back to the core of faith. In whatever situation he found himself or whatever situation he found the church, he always came back to the same message: the good news of is that Christ died and was raised and because we are now in Christ, we, too, have new life.

Despite the good news this Philippians text lifts up, to tell you the truth, for a long time I did not care for this Philippians text. The images of every knee bending; every tongue confessing Jesus as Lord – those images are too triumphal for my taste. They make me think of Christian nationalism and all the terror and abuse that causes in the world. The terror and abuse any strident righteousness causes in the world. So I avoided this text for a long time.

I'm not sure what caused me to read it more carefully in recent years. Probably because I had to preach on it. Whatever it was, I am glad I've revisited it. There's some triumph in it, to be sure, but it's not shiny, flag waving, chest-thumping triumph. It's hard-won, bruised, and scarred kind of triumph. It's the risen Lord saying to Thomas "here, touch my hands, reach out and touch my wounded side" kind of triumph. It is triumph that comes — as the heart of our faith does — from Good News by way of humility.

Scholars aren't sure exactly what the congregation at Philippi was facing that caused Paul to pen this letter from his prison cell. We know the congregation at Philippi was the first church Paul founded in Europe. We know he was deeply fond of the people there and grateful for their care and support of him. We know there was opposition to their faith from outside the church. And it is clear there is significant division within and among the congregation based on Paul's repeated calls to them for unity.

What we don't know is the source of that discord. But it must have been sufficiently intractable that news had made its way back to Paul that things were not well among them. That they were embroiled in some kind of conflict.

And Paul writes them to urge them toward unity. Be of the same mind, he says. Have the same love. Be in full accord. Be of one mind. And then finally, Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

Paul isn't talking about finding intellectual agreement. He's not advocating they should all think the same way. What Paul is driving toward is something more akin to a mindset. A way of being, an attitude, an orientation.² He is calling to the church to live in a certain way, in the pattern of Christ.³

That pattern, Paul says, is one of humility. Forgoing selfish ambition and conceit and looking to the interests of others. This is the kind of humility we see in Christ Jesus.

My friend and colleague Tom Are has written that "Humility isn't an idea; it's a practice. Humility is not a thought; it's an attitude. Humility is a way of engaging those around you."⁴

I know you are divided, Paul writes, but let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. Live by this Christ-shaped pattern.

And because - as any parent of a five year-old can tell you - humans who are at odds with one another are quick to come up with a lot of reasons they couldn't possibly be of the same mind... It usually sounds something like, "But she started it," or "but that wasn't fair to me," or "why is everyone else getting what they want and I'm not getting

² Boring and Craddock, The People's New Testament Commentary. p. 616.

³ Tom Are, Joy Even On Your Worst Day. p. 56. I am grateful to Tom for the phrase "Christ-shaped pattern"

⁴ (p. 58)

what I want.” We say it differently as grown-ups, but it’s not clear we outgrow these impulses.

And what does Paul do? He encourages the people to pattern their lives after Christ. And he doesn’t just encourage them, he reminds them:

There is encouragement in Christ,

The Greek text reads “If then, there is any encouragement in Christ,” but that Greek phrase doesn’t mean it could go either way. It’s a strong statement in the affirmative.”⁵

Paul’s not offering a wishy-washy thought about what might be nice.

Paul — who is writing from his jail cell — tells the church (tells us...tells me),

There IS encouragement in Christ.

There IS consolation from love,

There IS sharing in the Spirit,

There IS compassion and sympathy

And then he makes a brilliant move. To drive home his point, he doesn’t preach to them or wag his finger. He sings. He launches into a hymn. If I had to guess, I think it would have been a familiar hymn to the church in Philippi. I think it was a song they had sung together in good times and hard times. You know songs like this:

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound.

There is a balm in Gilead

Songs whose melody lingered in their ears and whose words were written on their hearts. A friend of mine says, “Music has an honesty that speaks the same language as the soul.”⁶ And so Paul sings and I have to imagine the whole congregation sings along:

[Christ Jesus]

though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

⁷ but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸ he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

⁵ Boring and Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary*, p. 616.

⁶ Tom Are, Jr. *Joy Even on Your Worst Day*. p. 49. Tom also deserves the credit for connecting Paul’s use of this hymn as a way of emotionally connecting to the church.

Paul uses the hymn to remind us of the event that creates and defines our life together —the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, Son of God, that gives new life. To speak on the level of our souls and remind us who we are.

The hymn reminds us that if anyone had a right to grasp on to the power and majesty of God, it was Jesus. But instead, he chose to empty himself. It is easy for us who know the end of the story to forget that this death was a real death.⁷ The tomb in which Jesus lay was a final resting place. A dead end. Humility had a heavy cost.

And yet this costly, dead end place is precisely where God transforms Christ's extravagant humility to be the place of victory.

In weeks like this one - when we are overwhelmed by the weight of the world, when the paths all look like dead ends - it may be time to remember what defines us. It may be time to be reminded that we are defined not by our own success. We are defined by the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the Christ-shaped way we are invited to live.

I had the privilege of traveling with a group of pastors to Israel and Palestine in May of 2019. It was an amazing trip. There is something powerful about standing by the sea of Galilee and hiking the hills around Bethlehem. It is holy to stand in the garden of Gethsemane and to enter the Old City of Jerusalem.

It is disheartening to see the walls built to divide and protect that fragment the hills and valleys. It is disquieting to drive through checkpoints on your way in and out of Bethlehem in the West Bank and have an armed soldier board the tour bus to make sure we are who we say we are because violence is so commonplace. It is disorienting to spend a morning hearing Israelis talk of the love the land and their desire to live in peace and the ever-present threat of violence they live with only to spend the afternoon hearing Palestinians talk of the love of the land and their desire to live in peace and the ever-present oppression they live with.

One of the most moving and memorable meals we had during the trip was hosted by a family of Palestinian Christians on their farm. The family's land is in dispute. The legal issues are complicated by world history and the politics of the region and historical record keeping. The family regularly deals with threats and damage to their crops and a year ago two of the brothers were assaulted on their farm by masked men. What I

⁷ Craddock, Fred. Interpretation Bible Commentary. p. 41-42).

remember about that meal is not what we ate. I have no idea what we ate. What I remember about the meal is the host telling us his family's Christian way of living in the midst of the tensions of the region. It is simply: We refuse to be enemies. We refuse to be enemies.

The realities of this world are overwhelming. Sometimes the circumstances of our own lives are overwhelming. In those times it is hard to know what do to, what to think, what to pray.

But, remember who you are, church.

The way has been shown to us.

It is the way of the cross, the way of humility, the way of emptying ourselves for the sake of others.

In that way is our hope. Our truth. Our very life.

Thanks be to God.

Prayers of the People

Based on Psalm 106

Let us pray:

Holy Lord, we praise you for *you are good to us and your love never fails*.

We tell stories of the ways you care for your people throughout history — creating us, redeeming us, sustaining us.

We tell stories of the dreams you have for your creation — to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly in your ways.

We tell stories of healing and hope and ways coming from no way.

We tell them over and over, we teach them to our children, because there are moments when our hearts are heavy and it is hard to remember them, hard to believe them.

So remember us, Lord, remember us and show kindness to us. Save us from cynicism and despair, from rigid thinking, from creating a world that is us versus them.

Save not only us, but all of your children —

Those who live in fear,

those who are hated,

those who are being terrorized,

those who are evacuated,

those who are captured and those who love them,

those who prepare for war, those already at war,

those who make decisions now with thousands upon thousands of lives hanging in the balance.

We pray especially today for the people of Israel and the people of Palestine, the people of Ukraine and the people of Russia.

Save your children, O God, and give them life, because they belong to you.

Be near to those whose lives are threatened because the very earth shook under their feet,

whose homes and schools and hospitals are destroyed.

We pray especially today for the people of Afghanistan.

Be near to those who suffer daily consequences of political upheaval,

who don't have enough food to eat or access to medicines,

and little hope of leaders who care for the well-being of all the people.

Be near to those who flee their homes and livelihoods,

who struggle to find a safe place to be,

whose psyches are traumatized,

and who find themselves overwhelmed by language and culture and laws that are foreign.

Save your children, O God, and give them life, because they belong to you.

Be near to us, O God,

the broken-hearted, the sick, the grieving.

The anxious, the desperate, the hopeless.

The overworked, the stretched thin, the lost.

Save your children, O God, and give us life, because we belong to you.

We praise you, O God, for keeping the promises you make to your people and for the new life that comes into our lives.

We praise you, O God, for giving us the courage to work for peace and justice, to hold onto hope.

We praise you, O God, for you created the world. You brought the people out of Egypt. You fed the people with manna. You became like us as a human infant. You faced the depths of death and yet you brought new life. And so we praise you.

And we pray with confidence the prayer you taught us, saying: