

Philippians 2:5-11

Let 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.

PALM SUNDAY PARADES

What is Palm Sunday all about? What were Jesus and his disciples doing when they paraded into Jerusalem? Some commentators suggest that it was something akin to a protest march. It was a “peasant procession” that entered Jerusalem from the east led by Jesus riding on a donkey.

It is possible that there was another procession that day occurring at the same time. A full-fledged “imperial procession” led by Pontius Pilate and his Roman soldiers could have entered Jerusalem from the west.

I wonder. Did Jesus time his entry into Jerusalem to coincide with this display of military might? I suspect its possible.

Note the contrast. Pilate’s procession demonstrated a power and glory that was based upon violence. This parade was the epitome of the empire that ruled the world in those days.

Jesus’ procession embodied a different view of power and glory. The power of his kingdom was not based upon putting people down. The power of his kingdom was based upon lifting people up.

These radically different worldviews were about to collide in Jerusalem.

We should not be surprised. The difference between God’s kingdom as revealed in Jesus and the kingdoms of this world is the difference between east and west, night and day.

The popular author, M. Scott Peck decided to read the gospels straight through and just try to understand as best he could the basic message of the scripture without all the personal “filters” we often put on the message.

After doing this he wrote in astonishment,
 “The Jesus of the Gospels ... whom some suggest is the best kept secret of Christianity ... did not have much peace of mind as we ordinarily think of peace of mind in the world’s terms, and insofar as we can be his followers, perhaps we won’t either ... It is as if most Christians haven’t read the Gospels, and most Christian clergy are not even able to preach the real truth of the Gospels, because if they did, their congregations would flee out the door.”

Scott has a point. Way too many people have fled the church, and we members of the clergy are not interested in seeing any more go. If that means tweaking the image of Jesus and downplaying the more difficult parts of the message, then so be it. We are quite willing to do it, and, most of the time we are quite successful.

We manage to turn Jesus into the great therapist who lessens our anxiety and supports our pet projects. We are like the crowds who cheered Jesus as he made his way into Jerusalem. We shout, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Here comes King Jesus, hoorah!”

But, do we really know the one for whom we cheer? Do we really want to follow him? Or are we like the crowds who only wanted to make him king because he could give them a free meal? Do we just want Jesus for what he can do for us?

We could say, “Jesus was unique. Only he could walk that way. Only he could talk that way. Only he could meet the violence of the world armed only with God’s truth and a message of forgiveness.

After all he was God’s Son, and we’re not. It’s unrealistic to think that we could do the same.”

We could say that. We might like to say that.

A SONG OF THE CROSS

But, when you read the gospels we learn that Jesus does not let his disciples (or us) off that easy. Jesus told his disciples that if they wanted to follow him, they would have to follow him into Jerusalem. They would have to take up a cross. They would have to deny themselves in order to be his disciples.

The same is true today. Discipleship is always a matter of imitation. We too must follow Jesus on the way to the cross. We too must empty ourselves in order to be filled with the call of Christ.

The early church understood this very well. In fact they even sang about it. According to most scholars our lesson for today was a hymn about the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

What we sing about tells us a lot about what we believe, what we think is most important. And the early church sang about the cross. The early church said in song that our attitude, our mindset should be the same as that of Jesus as he walked the road that led to the cross.

Have you ever noticed how many of the great old hymns are about the cross? “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”, “In the Cross of Christ I Glory”, “Beneath the Cross of Jesus” ... the list goes on and on. Look it up in the back of our hymnal. There is a whole section devoted to songs about the cross. The cross defines what it means to be a Christian.

The cross looms over us no matter where we sit in this sanctuary. It is with us when we enter and it is with us we leave. There’s a reason for that. The cross stands at the very center of our faith.

The cross cannot be removed or covered up by our desire for a feel good religion. No, on the contrary, the cross challenges our self-serving attitudes and our desire for easy affirmation.

SELFISH AMBITION VERSUS THE CROSS

That's why Paul is quoting this hymn about the cross. Some sort of squabble is disrupting the church in Philippi. We don't know exactly what the squabble is all about, but Paul feels compelled to tell the Philippians that they shouldn't do anything out of "selfish ambition or conceit."

Selfish ambition and conceit have been a problem in the church from the very beginning. On one occasion just after Jesus tells his disciples about the need to take up a cross and follow him the disciples show their total lack of understanding. Once Jesus leaves their presence they begin to argue about who is the greatest and who will be on Jesus' right and left in glory.

But Jesus still hears them and tells them that in the kingdom of God leaders do not lord it over the people. Instead leadership in the kingdom of God is based on service.

Not much has changed. The history of the church is littered with those who have used the Christian faith as an excuse to promote their own political and personal goals. We are still arguing about who is going to get all the glory.

The cross, the symbol of sacrifice was transformed into a gilded sign of power and prestige. Ironically, the cross was even used to decorate the shields of soldiers.

I have been fascinated by the fact that in some churches today the cross has been covered up or even replaced by the video screen. The symbolism is apparent. We want to make the cross into something else or cover it up. We want to keep Jesus but change his message.

But, Paul is reminding the Philippians (and us) that the cross is not optional. The cross is the key to understanding what it means to be Christian. The Christian life is always cruciform in shape.

DOWNWARD MOBILITY

The Christian life is not about filling ourselves up. The Christian life is about emptying ourselves out. In the words of Henri Nouwen following Jesus is the way of "downward mobility." That's a great way to put it. In an upwardly mobile world, Jesus encourages us to go against the flow, to downsize, to give up the things of this world that we might gain what is really important.

Some members of a Bible study talked about downsizing after retirement. They said that at first they were reluctant to give up all of their "stuff", but after they did it, they found that there was a certain freedom to simplifying their life. Their life was being controlled by their possessions and now they are much happier.

I think that this is true to a certain extent for almost all of us. As we strive to live the good life and fill our world with the things that we want, we separate ourselves from what is really important. Jesus shows us that the way to true humanity is this way of downward mobility.

Paradoxically the goal of the Christian life is not to have more and more. It is to have less and less.

And that, of course, goes against the mindset of the current age; that goes against the mindset of any age. Just as Jesus' procession on Palm Sunday ran into the hard reality of Caesar's troops, so our attempts to follow Jesus will run into the hard reality of a society that worships power, prestige and possessions.

Let's face it. We are going against the flow. We are out of step with the rest of the world.

Have you ever noticed how much time we spend trying to get into step with the rest of the world? We want to dress the right way. We want to say the right things. We want to hang out with the right people.

And then along comes Jesus with the most radical message any of us have ever heard. He talks about sacrifice and service. He suggests that we must choose to be different. Instead of striving to get what we want we should strive to give up our life for the sake of the kingdom of God.

That is the message of the cross.

IMITATING JESUS

When I was being bad, my father used to tell me that I needed an attitude adjustment! Paul told those Philippians who were filled with ambition and conceit that they too needed an attitude adjustment. They needed to have the mind of Christ.

How can we do that? How can we adjust our attitude? How can we have the mind of Christ? The Bible tells us that we do it by imitating Christ. We live a life that is cruciform in shape.

I am not the greatest dancer in the world. I am not even a good dancer. But, if I imitate closely the dance steps my instructor teaches me I do get better. I have more confidence on the dance floor. I have more fun. Imitating the expert can change even the person with two left feet.

The same is true in the Christian life. Imitating Jesus can change us.

A preacher told of a man who was by nature a rather angry, short-tempered person. As a young man he was notorious for the use of his fists in several barroom brawls.

But, then he began to take the call of Christ seriously. He noted that Jesus never lifted a hand against anyone, and he began to change. He said,

“So I just decided to follow Jesus, to copy him. I really tried to turn the other cheek, and if I failed at that, I would ask Jesus to forgive me and would try again. I would ask myself, when confronted with conflict, ‘How would Jesus handle this?’”

And gradually, step-by-step this man came to more closely resemble the Lord he was attempting to love. He became more like Jesus by attempting to follow Jesus.

This is how it has been with me. My imitation of Jesus is certainly not perfect. But, the more I forgive people who have wronged me the better I get at it. The more I try to turn the other cheek the better I get at it.

EXCHANGING ONE FORM OF SUFFERING FOR ANOTHER

When I hear Jesus forgiving others, even as they were crucifying him it does something to me. Jesus said, “Father forgive them. They don’t know what they are doing.”

And those words are still true. We still don’t know what we are doing.

But, Jesus forgives us. And that changes everything. And so when we look to the cross we do not see a tragedy. We see the power of love and forgiveness. We see hope that is eternal.

And by the power of the Spirit we are enabled to follow Jesus, sometimes in small ways and sometimes in big ways. It is not what we wanted. It is not what we expected. But, it is what we need. We are transformed as we serve in his name.

Janet Ramsey gave a very unusual and I think helpful definition of forgiveness. She wrote that forgiveness is “exchanging one form of suffering for another ... namely, the passive suffering of victimhood is exchanged for the more active suffering of forgiving.”

In other words, instead of just reacting to what someone has done “to us” we are able to do something positive to make things better. The inevitable conflict of the human enterprise becomes the backdrop for forgiveness and reconciliation.

Martin Luther King once said, “Human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men [and women] willing to be coworkers with God.”

God through the power of the Spirit has made us coworkers with Christ. We share in the suffering, and we share in the glory.

You can’t get to Easter unless you go through Good Friday. It’s more than a liturgical fact. It’s a fact of life, and it’s a fact of our faith. As Paul put it in his letter to the Philippians, our “attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 2:5 NIV)

Salvation and forgiveness always come at a very high price. In the final analysis salvation and forgiveness came at the cost of the death of God’s own Son on the cross. And that has implications for us as well.

Eugene Peterson wrote, “Christ is the way as well as the truth and life. When we don’t do it his way, we mess up the truth and we miss out on the life. We can’t live a life more like Jesus by embracing a life less like Jesus.”

“Take up your cross and follow me,” Jesus once told his disciples. And Jesus tells us the same thing. There is great mystery in a God who suffers, but there is great hope as well for those who have the courage to embrace that suffering personally.

A friend told me this week about two Mennonite farmers who had a terrible falling out. It was a real scandal of a community that prided itself on forgiveness and peace.

In the Mennonite church three sacraments are acknowledged, baptism, the Lord’s Supper and foot washing. Once a year those who had disagreements with another member of the community, in obedience to the Lord’s own example, took the extraordinarily humbling act of washing their enemy’s feet.

The people wondered what would happen when they had this service. Would the farmers have the courage to put aside such bitter differences?

Their questions were soon answered when one of the farmers came to church with basin and towel in hand. Without hesitation he washed the feet of his enemy as a sign of forgiveness, and his former enemy in turn did the same for him.

That, my friends is a picture of what God’s grace can do, and in many different ways that is what we are called to do. So, I encourage you to exchange one kind of suffering for another.

I encourage you to take up a cross and a towel and a basin and follow him. Take the way of downward mobility because when we are on our knees in service, we are indeed closer to eternal life.

Amen.