

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.

THE DREAM OF SUCCESS

There was a man who had a recurring dream. He said,

“In the dream I am rushing to a classroom to take an examination for a course that I had completely forgotten. I had forgotten not just the exam but also the entire course.

I had not attended a single session since the beginning of the semester. And now the time had come to pay for my error. I had to take the exam with absolutely no preparation.”

I’ve had a version of that dream myself. The driving force in my life, especially during my student days was the fear of failure.

I know. I shouldn’t have been that way. I should have learned because I wanted to, because I loved what I was doing and had an insatiable curiosity about the world around me.

But, it wasn’t that way with me. And I dare say it wasn’t that way with many of my fellow students. We were out to succeed, to make the grade, to justify ourselves by hard work. And so the dream, no the nightmare that haunted many of us was the fear of failure.

I suspect that all of us have a version of that nightmare.

No one wants to be a failure in life. We all want to be number one, a cut above the rest in some area. Whoever said, "It's not whether you win or lose but how you play the game" has not taken a basketball team to the final four.

The people we lift up, the people we encourage others to copy are often successful as our world defines success. They are the ones who have power, prestige, and knowledge. They are the ones who are on the way up.

No don't misunderstand. I enjoy competing. I applaud those who strive for excellence. But, quite often winning becomes an all-consuming passion. Quite often people are badly hurt in order to satisfy someone's desire to succeed.

Robert Bellah, a social scientist observed this about American life,

"The American dream is often a very private dream of being a star, the uniquely successful and admirable one, the one who stands out in a crowd of ordinary folks."

We see people trying to live out that dream when it comes to education, economics, sports, and yes, even religion. But, is that God's dream for us?

DOWNWARD MOBILITY

It seems to me that the life and teachings of Jesus suggest a different dream. In a world focused on competition Jesus emphasized collaboration. In a world that idealizes the lives of the rich and famous, Jesus paid special attention to the poor and forgotten.

Henri Nouwen put it best. He said that the way of Jesus is the way of "downward mobility."

Very few of us are looking for downward mobility these days. And it wasn't what they were looking for in Jesus' day either.

Ancient Israel had an insatiable appetite for political and military success. They had been the doormats for the Roman oppressors too long. They wanted God to send a Messiah who would lift them up. They wanted a warrior king who would lead his people to victory.

This is the reason that the people shouted "Hosanna" as Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday long ago. In him they saw the possibility of upward mobility. They saw one who could give them victory.

The hosannas were the right words shouted for the wrong reason. The people expressed their support for Jesus not because of who He was but because of who they wanted Him to be.

The same was true for Jesus' disciples. James and John wanted to be on Jesus' right and left in glory, the glory of a grand military victory and a new earthly kingdom.

But, they had the wrong idea. Jesus was not promoting upward mobility. Jesus was promoting downward mobility. Jesus wasn't talking about moving on up. Jesus was talking about moving on down.

It is a difficult concept to understand. That's why Jesus had to emphasize it so much with his disciples, telling them over and over again about the cross and what it meant.

And that's why we walk with Jesus on the way to the cross these 40 days of Lent. We need to be reminded again and again. We have to encourage each other to walk a way that does not come easy.

SUPER JESUS?

A minister told of watching one of the Superman movies with his grandchildren. After it was over he asked, "Which part did you like best?"

They both agreed. They liked the part when Superman miraculously saved the little boy."

"Which part did you like the least?" They agreed on that one as well. They said, "I didn't like the part where Superman lost his power and became a man." (For those of you who do not watch Superman movies, in this particular flick Superman voluntarily gave up his powers so that he could marry Lois Lane.)

I think the reaction of the children is our reaction. We want our heroes to be super all the time. We want them to be larger than life, to be above the problems that bedevil us mere mortals.

And we especially want Jesus to be super. We want a Jesus who agrees with us and gives us what we want.

But, today's lesson gives a much different picture. Jesus divests himself of power. He became a mere mortal so that he could be with us.

Jesus humbled himself out of love.

Deep down inside I wonder if many of us would prefer a superman Jesus who is above the trials and tribulations that befall ordinary men and women.

But, this passage will not let us indulge in that fantasy. We learn that He who was in very nature God emptied himself. He divested himself of power and glory and became a human being.

The biggest threat to the early church came in the form of a heresy that attacked this core principal. These early heretics believed that the power of God entered into Jesus at his baptism but that power, that Spirit left him before he was crucified.

You see these heretics had real problems with the idea that the very Son of God could suffer and die on a cross. If the very nature of God was in Christ, how could God allow him to be treated in such a fashion?

We expect better of one who claims to be God.

Paul spoke about this problem in his first letter to the Corinthians. He wrote, "We preach Christ crucified; a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."

The cross is still a stumbling block. We still think that the only way to be successful is to impose our will on others through the use of wealth or military might.

But, Jesus gives a new definition of success. Glory comes through sacrifice and service. We fill ourselves up by emptying ourselves out.

THE LOVE OF A SERVANT

The powerful love of God in Christ is never coercive. Jesus does not force us to follow him and love him.

In fact the Bible teaches us that Christ did not even wait for us to decide. Long ago the Son of God gave up heaven and even his own life in order to bring salvation to the world.

God's divine love revealed in Jesus is the love of a servant, the one who was willing to give up everything in order to bring salvation down to our level.

We might say that Jesus was truly human. But, what does that mean for us today?

Paul told the Philippians, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." We too are called to serve one another as he has served us.

Gordon Cosby, the founding pastor of The Church of the Savior in Washington, DC, told of a sculpture created by one of the church members.

The work depicts Jesus with basin and towel as though ready to wash the disciple's feet, and they placed the sculpture on the lawn of the church's Christ House Mission Home.

(This is a halfway home for street people who are sick but not sick enough according to the city's standards to qualify for hospitalization.)

The sculpture has a basin that is constantly being replenished by water. I suspect you can imagine the kind of indignities the sculpture was subjected to in that location.

Cosby told of a drunk who came by and shared his drink with Jesus, leaving the bottle in the basin, and then after a moment's reflection came back to take the brown paper wrapping off so that the gift would be more seemly.

Another passer by brought a dead Christmas tree and placed it in the basin. And so it went. The pastor found himself continually cleaning the basin so that the flow of water might not be interrupted.

There were many who thought that the sculpture needed to be moved so that it wouldn't be subjected to such mistreatment. They argued, "It is so dirty and vulnerable in its present location."

In the end they decided not to move it.

The pastor explained that from a practical standpoint moving that fine sculpture just seemed like the prudent thing to do.

But, he said that was also symbolic of what we often attempt to do with Jesus. We want to move him to a "safe place." We want to move him out of this "dirty world" so that the unpleasant realities of life won't always be on our doorstep.

So they left the sculpture of Jesus where it belonged ... in the dangerous, dirty and hurting world.

By the way, there's a Paul Harvey rest of the story to this story.

Gordon Cosby, the founding pastor of The Church of the Savior died this week at the age of 94. Gordon spent his last days in that shelter he built for the sick homeless people.

Jim Wallis, the editor of Sojourners was with Gordon during his last days and marveled at how he died. Jim wrote,

"Gordon Cosby taught us how to live by the gospel and, in these last years and months, he also showed us how to die.

In one of my many visits near the end of his life, Gordon said to me in his deep graveling voice, "I am enjoying dying."

What a gospel thing to say. From the first time I heard Gordon preach, to the last sermon he did a few years ago, I have never heard the gospel and its meaning more clearly articulated than from Gordon Cosby.

Well into his 90s, and living in Christ House with the homeless men he always served, Gordon was less able to continue to do the all things he had done all day, every day, for so many people and over so many years.

'All I can really do is pray now,' Gordon said to me, 'but I have so much time now to pray!'

During a long Lenten fast a few of us undertook in 2011 to draw national attention to the vulnerability of the poor in Washington's budget debates, Gordon told me he had constructed a special 'Jesus Prayer' for my fasting and prayed it 100 times a day!

Knowing that Gordon Cosby was praying for me that many times each day left me with such a sense of undergirding and sustenance, even without any food, for all those weeks.

His prayers literally lifted me."

Wallis concluded his eulogy by saying,

"I was blessed to be at Gordon's bedside the night before he died and with Mary alongside him — still loving one another after 70 years of marriage. I felt like I was standing there with countless thousands of people who would want to say how much Gordon loved them and how much they loved this man of God.

As one person said last night, 'You knew he loved like Christ, and he made you want to love like Christ too.'"

SING HOSANNA FOR THE RIGHT REASON

Like the crowd who shouted "Hosanna" so long ago, we too cheer for Jesus. But often our cheers are for a Messiah of our own making, a safe Jesus who is far removed from the pain and suffering of this world.

We want a Jesus who will make life more profitable and comfortable.

Some think that their association with Jesus will make them more respectable.

Still others wish to honor Jesus so that victory will be theirs, kind of like the batter who crosses himself before stepping to the plate or the wide receiver who points heavenward after scoring a touchdown.

But, all these are unworthy reasons to shout Hosanna.

Our attitude should be influenced by the life of our Savior. Paul wrote in the verses that precede our lesson for today,

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." (Philippians 2:3-4)

This is a very practical summary of what it means to follow Jesus.

And when we live this way, when we adopt this way of downward mobility, then we experience the power of God.

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.

In John’s gospel Philip asks Jesus to show them the Father. Jesus answers, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

And today’s lesson teaches us that we see the divinity of Jesus most clearly on the cross. The cross is the “throne” from which King Jesus rules.

There is great mystery in a God who suffers, but this is the God revealed in the life of Jesus. Divinity is revealed in humble service. Divinity is revealed in self-giving love. Divinity is revealed on the cross.

Ironically, when all seems lost, when the Son of God is being killed, the power of God’s grace changes everything. “Father forgive them,” Jesus cries from the cross.

And God does just that.

And all those things that Jesus did not seek directly, power and glory, they come to him. God gives Him the name that is above every name.

The One the world rejected became the cornerstone. The One who was dead is now alive.

We’ll talk about that more next week.

But, for now let us embrace the way of downward mobility. Let us walk with Jesus on the way to the cross.

Amen.