

Sunday Dec. 13, 2020
Lesson 2: Imitate Christ
Scripture: Phil. 2: 1-11

Context:

Our new series focuses on God's hope for humanity. For the season of Advent and Christmastide, we will look at "God with us," in scripture. The second lesson comes from the book of Philippians with Philippians 2:1-11 as the primary text. Our purpose today is to explore how imitating Christ is an ongoing goal of the Christian life.

The book of Philippians is a letter written to the congregation at Philippi. In this part of the letter, the writer Paul repeats several themes and words from the opening part of his letter. Paul reminds them of the power of joy, fellowship, love, partnership, affection, and unity.¹ As he stresses them not to do anything selfish and to emulate the values he has named before, Paul lifts up the conscious qualities by which the church has been identified and sustained.² As a pastor, Paul is helping them to see the potential within themselves and to not be trapped by behaviors and experiences of the past.

Paul wants them to understand the importance of unity as well as harmony in the church. Other aspects of the letter indicate there has been conflict and tension between particular individuals. Paul believes part of the problem is linked to one unhealthy branch of individualism. Paul indicates in this letter and in letters to other churches some of the problems with an unchecked individualism: an unwillingness to bear another's burden, a distancing from oneself from partnership in the gospel, an aloofness from the common joy and suffering, and a coldness to our connection with others who are part of us.³ If this individualism has taken root in the church in Philippi, they are bound to experience pain and devastation.

As such, Paul must give them another way. His elaboration of the mindset they are to possess comes in the form of a hymn. Today, known as the Christ hymn, Philippians 2: 6-11 is pure poetry as we receive a vision of the mind and life of Jesus Christ.

The hymn provides to us a glimpse of who God is and the life of Jesus. There is a rehearsal of the Christ story with the three movements of pre-existence, existence, and post-existence.⁴ Even though Christ was existent before his "birth," he served as human, and then gave his life. The plea for the Christian church is to have his mind, to emulate someone who sought to serve others and was not petty or dismissive of the relationship with others. The people have been given an example to follow; they have a choice.

¹ Craddock, Fred B. "Philippians," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 35.

² Ibid., 36.

³ Ibid., 38.

⁴ Ibid., 40.

Application

The Christ hymn is one of the most beloved scripture passages in the New Testament. The imagery of our Lord pouring himself out upon the cross is a painful sight, and yet the description of his reasoning beforehand is beautiful. Jesus did not equate divinity or power with escaping pain or death. Instead, he emptied himself and became human, experiencing rejection and the pain of death by dying on a cross. His example showed to the world his true power as Lord of all.

There are always caveats when we read this text about the behavior we are to exhibit after reading such a passage. Of course, being humble does not mean allowing people to step all over you. Emptying ourselves is something we have to watch, especially in helping professions where it seems justifiable for long hours and assisting people in need. We all should realize we are not Jesus and we cannot save the world, as much as we might try. There is only one Lord and Savior of the world.

However, the point Paul makes is one to help us grow and develop as followers of our Lord. Being humble does not mean thinking less of yourself. Doing difficult things and staying in the thick of chaos isn't always easiest. Giving of yourself will force you to let go of things you cannot control and letting the chips fall into place.

If you look at the conflict looming behind this passage, you can see how this hymn would both provoke and hopefully inspire people to let go of themselves and to let God do what God is called to do. Sometimes being a Christian isn't about being right or having all the answers or being on top. Sometimes being a Christian and a part of the body of Christ is submitting to Jesus.

One of the greatest challenges in conflict, particularly in the church, is when one party thinks they are for some reason more entitled than anyone else to have a say or opinion to predominate the conversation. What is often at stake is not the ministry or the church's stability, but their own ego. They become the simultaneous hero/heroine and the martyr if anyone defies them publicly or privately. And the rest of the body is left not being able to move forward as the body of Christ as others must tiptoe around them.

On the other hand, there are those who have no problem looking out solely for themselves. They do not care who is hurt and who is a pawn as long as they can get ahead in this life. They are even great at justifying saying: "Well, they will thank me later; I know what's best." If we are able to convince ourselves of things without having an honest conversation with others, we have only looked out for ourselves.

Christ our Lord makes it clear in this passage and the way he lived and died that being a prima donna or self-selected Most Valuable Player does not have a place in the Christian tradition and in the church. Jesus poured himself out and gave us an example of goodness. He modeled for us how to love, to unite, and watch out for others. He did not use people to get ahead and he did not take on politics in order to benefit himself. Jesus gave of himself so others might live.

It is always important for us as a body of Christ to think of others. We are called as followers of Christ to share love with others and encourage those around us. We are called to be the advocate for those in need and for those who we see as brothers and sisters in Christ. We are called to profess Christ as Lord with both words and actions.

Why do you think it is important in conflict to be humble and to recognize your own strengths and growing edges? What example does Jesus model for us when it comes to serving and loving others? Why is it important to watch out for others, especially if it

doesn't directly benefit us? What was a time someone watched out for you and you felt the love of Christ? When was a time someone didn't watch out for you and how did that make you feel? How can you adopt the spirit Christ possessed?

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