

Philippians 2:1-13

¹If 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, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

12 Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Matthew 21:23-32

23 When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?' ²⁴Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?" ²⁶But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' ²⁷So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

28 'What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today." ²⁹He answered, "I will not"; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir"; but he did not go. ³¹Which of the two did the will of his father?' They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Humble Like Jesus?

Last week's worship service focused upon the importance of our unity, about being of one heart, one spirit, focused in our mission and not just trying to make a name for ourselves. Today's epistle lesson echoes that unity theme, but it adds an important element to unity: that is humility. Being humble is a challenge these days, isn't it? I think the songwriter Mac Davis summed it up quite well when he wrote these lyrics:

Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble,
When you're perfect in every way,
I can't wait to look in the mirror,
I get better looking each day.
To know me is to love me,
I must be a hell of a man,
Oh lord it's hard to be humble,
But I'm doing the best that I can.

Humility is generally understood as being timid, as unassertive. Humility was not viewed as much of a virtue by the great Greek philosophers; it was not at all virtuous to be unassertive because it was seen as weakness. It's not virtuous to be a doormat, to allow others to walk all over you. Humility doesn't seem to get us very far in today's world. We say that nice guys always finish where? LAST! We say, "Look out for number one," "fend for yourself," "Don't let people walk all over you." In the musical *Camelot*, King Arthur's son Mordred says something to this effect:

"When the Bible says that the meek shall not inherit the earth,
it means that they shall inherit the dirt!"

If you don't assert yourself, that's what you'll end up with; dirt! We have to carve out our territory, to stake our claim, to defend what is ours! We can't afford to be humble or we'll lose out on...everything.

When we think about Jesus, he didn't seem *that* humble. When the priests and elders come up to Jesus the next day demanding that he explain "by what authority" he could raise such a ruckus, he hardly speaks humbly when he tells them that they would be the *last* to enter the kingdom of heaven. If you read the verses that precede today's gospel lesson, you'd read about him entering the Temple on Palm Sunday, knocking over tables, cracking a whip, and driving folks out of the Temple – not exactly humble behavior as we might define it. We might expect a more humble Jesus to walk past the money changers, shake his head, and say to his disciples, "They really shouldn't be doing that." But knocking over tables, driving out money changers, cracking a whip...is that *humble*? Paul says we are to be of the same mind as Jesus, the one who humbled himself. Did Paul know the same Jesus who cracked the whip and knocked over tables and said all sorts of harsh things to the priests and scribes and elders and Pharisees? How can we explain *that* type of behavior as humble?

Let me clear the air a little here. I don't think there was anything *wrong* with Jesus confronting the Pharisees or scribes or priests or elders or anyone else he may have confronted. I think he was right on in his criticism of all of them, and he was right to confront them about it. Furthermore I think that this is one trait of Jesus that we all can agree was a good trait – to speak out against those who challenged him, those who conspired against him, but be careful! There are an awful lot of people, and some of them Christian, who think to themselves, "Well Jesus confronted those who challenged him; so I can also confront those who challenge me!" The world has more than its share of arrogant Christians who want to promote their own cause *IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST*. There are those who condemn every criticism against them as satanic or evil because they have convinced themselves that they are righteous. I've been there; once I thought I had a special

connection to Christ and nothing I did was ever wrong. When people challenged me, I scoffed inside, thinking that they were just ignorant or jealous of my relationship with Jesus. Boy, did I discover I was wrong. I realized that my spiritual experiences had made me proud as if I alone was righteous. I lacked humility.

And this is the virtue that Jesus absolutely *did* possess; humility. Yes, he spoke out against the chief priests and the scribes and the elders and the Pharisees but not in order to defend his ego; he did so because he was submissive to the will of the Father, and this is the foundation of true humility; submission to the will of God. We are called – all who profess faith in Jesus Christ – to speak out against injustice, against what is evil in this world, but we do so as ones who ourselves submit to the will of the living God who holds authority over us. Jesus declared that he and the Father were one, but Paul is absolutely right when he says that Jesus humbled himself. Jesus had no ego to defend; he only defended the will and desire of a loving God and was not afraid to do or say anything necessary to bring people to change their selfish ways.

And Jesus was obedient to the Father because he trusted the Father. Jesus called him “Papa,” *Abba*. We are sometimes prone to use lofty language when we pray to God; “*Almighty and everlasting Creator of the Universe we bid thee to lend your ear to our humble confession blah blah blah...*” Jesus starts his prayer by saying “Dad.” That speaks of relationship. Not only that but Jesus did everything that his “Dad” required him to do, and that kind of obedience can only come from trust which can only come from a relationship. My wife calls me from the other room and tells me to come quickly, I don’t ask why. I go. It’s a kneejerk reaction. I come to her because I trust that it’s important for me to go there. Jesus went everywhere that the Father told him to go because he had complete trust in the Father.

And it was the good will of the Father that Jesus should come down so that we might experience firsthand the love of the Father expressed in so many ways to the lowly and to the haughty. To the lowly Jesus brought healing and food and forgiveness; to the haughty he brought a stern warning, that their behavior would not be welcomed in the kingdom of God, that the prostitutes and tax collectors and sinners who responded to God’s calling would be welcomed by a gracious God while the proud ones who felt themselves better than those *sinners* would be held up in the waiting room, that “the first shall be last and the last shall be first.” There’s nothing unloving about this message; in fact it’s what those folks needed to hear above all else. “Change, or you’ll suffer the consequences. Some changed; some didn’t. Today some change and some don’t. But a loving God has spoken to them; and he’s sent his Son to the proud to knock over a few of their tables and shake things up a little in order to get their attention, to get them to listen. How is that humble behavior? It’s submission to the will of God. How does it reflect God’s love? It expresses a strong desire to save us from sin and death.

And it’s exactly that kind of humility that we are called to demonstrate. It’s not a doormat mentality, but it is holding the mindset that others come first. We have a hard time with that, don’t we? We like to think of ourselves as better than others, which leads us to justify hatred and oppression and murder. Paul tells us to regard others as better than ourselves – that includes not just the poor and the sick and the slow but also the drug addict, the murderous jihadist, the oppressive dictator, the child molester...*the sinner*. Is that hard for you? Well it’s hard for me too. But do you know what? In God’s eyes I’m no better than they are. I may have been granted the grace to hear God a little better than they have, but I’m no better than they are, and we both have to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. God loves them just as much as he loves me, and he proves it by humbling himself, by coming to us and suffering for us, and dying for us, even dying on a cross which was the most humiliating form of death imaginable. It’s God considering others as better than himself. And experiencing that kind of love makes me indeed humble, and brings me to my knees at the feet of Jesus Christ, and leads me to confess that he is my Lord and Savior.

There's a true story about Booker T. Washington, great American educator who became president of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. He also worked very hard to promote the advancement of ex-slaves after the Civil War, using his influence to bring an end to segregation in the American South. One day Mr. Washington was walking through a rather exclusive part of town when he was stopped by a woman who asked if he would like to earn a few dollars by chopping some wood for her. Washington smiled, and having no pressing appointment on his schedule rolled up his sleeves, took an ax, cut up firewood for the woman, and stacked it up for her by the fireplace in her house. A young girl saw Mr. Washington chopping wood, recognized who he was, and later, told the wealthy woman who had cut her firewood for her. The woman was quite embarrassed and the next day went to Mr. Washington's office at the institute and apologized profusely. "That's alright," said Dr. Washington. "Occasionally I enjoy a little manual labor, and it's always a delight to do something for a friend." Booker T. Washington could have taken offense when asked to chop wood. He could have considered it a task below his position. He could have declared his identity and reminded his audience exactly who he was. But instead he just wanted to do something for a friend. Jesus often found himself in similar circumstances, on the one hand working to advance human dignity and justice while still being our friend. Let us exercise the kind of humility that grows out of the knowledge that we are all equally loved by a forgiving God who calls us to do all we can to advance his love in this world.