

Seventeenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A): "Jesus Is Lord"  
Philippians 2:1-13  
September 26-27, 2020  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Humility isn't a virtue that's gaining much traction in our world these days. We have to look high and low for examples of people in the news who are putting others' needs before their own, who, as Paul says in today's epistle from Philippians, "*in humility regard others as better than [themselves],*" who "*look not to [their] own interests, but to the interests of others.*" (Philippians 2:3b-4) We live in a time saturated with the attitude, "It's all about me!" Our society is marinating in a self-centered broth. The dish that's served up is words and actions that shout, "**My** needs matter, not **yours!**" "Survival of the fittest!"

In the midst of all the chest-thumping, preening and posturing, fear-mongering, belligerent bombast, shrill condemnation of others and smug self-justification, we can be tempted, seduced, into forgetting who and Whose we are. So thank Heaven for St. Paul's reminder to us in his letter to the Philippians, the most magnificent part of which we heard in today's epistle. Here's the paraphrase from *The Message*, using everyday language as a way to drive home what the Holy Spirit wants and needs us to hear:

*1-4 If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care— then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.*

*5-8 Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special*

*privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.*

*9-11 Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.*

*12-13 ... [R]edouble your efforts. Be energetic in your life of salvation, reverent and sensitive before God. That energy is God's energy, an energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what will give him the most pleasure.*

In the Roman world of Paul's time humility was considered a weakness, not a strength. It was associated with servitude. It was the quality of a slave, not a civic or religious leader. So for him to say that Christ humbled Himself was quite something: totally counter-cultural, absolutely nothing Gentile Christians would want to hear. We may not particularly want to hear it either. Humility is **not** a virtue the current world honors any more than the ancient world did. But if we want to **live** as Christians and not simply **label** ourselves Christian, it is a quality we need to work on.

We could come up with dozens of examples of our Lord Jesus' humility from the 4 Gospels, but in this letter to his friends at Philippi, Paul focuses on two: our Lord's selfless, obedient willingness to be born, to become human for our sakes, and to die a scandalous death to save us from our sins. He who was most pure got down and dirty by becoming one of us, and suffering not just the human condition but crucifixion. The Scripture lingo used is that He "emptied" Himself. He who was **Everything** made Himself **nothing**, compelled, driven by love: His and the Father's love for us. Elsewhere, St. Paul explains it this way, in his second letter to the people of Corinth:

*For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9)*

Luther called it “the great exchange”: Christ takes on our poverty and makes us rich, takes on the rags of our sin and robes us in His righteousness, dies our death and shares with us His resurrection.

If we really believe all that’s true, we can’t live our lives as if it isn’t. Again: are we going to **live** as Christians or just **label** ourselves Christian? Paul says:

*<sup>10</sup>...at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
<sup>11</sup>and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.*

Saying the words “Jesus Christ is Lord” was a lot dicier then than it is now. Paul was writing in the first century to residents of a **Roman** colony (Philippi, Greece), where the only acceptable allegiance was to **Caesar** as Lord. Caesar claimed to be divine, and Caesar wouldn’t brook any competition. Those who refused to burn incense to a statue of Caesar and to say aloud, “Caesar is Lord,” were executed, killed, martyred.

When we discuss the meaning of the Apostles’ Creed with the confirmands, we teach them that the earliest, shortest creed (profession of faith) is the three words, “Jesus is Lord.” It means: Jesus is my Savior, Jesus reigns supreme, Jesus calls the shots, what Jesus requires is what I pray and work to do. Jesus’ claim on me is greater than any other. Jesus’ example of love of God and neighbor, holy humility, self-sacrifice, joyful service, is what I want to mirror. Nobody’s asking me literally to profess the words, “Caesar is Lord,” but there’s a lot of competition for my soul out there. If someone didn’t know me and were judging by my actions, where would they guess my allegiance, my loyalty lies? Amen

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