



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, TN
Oct. 1, 2023
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "Humility and Hegemony"

Philippians 2:1-13 (NRSV)

2:1 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy,

2:2 make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

2:3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.

2:4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

2:5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

2:6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

2:7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,

2:8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.

2:9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,

2:10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

2:11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

2:12 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;

2:13 for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

“Humility and Hegemony”

Whenever you read Philippians, remember that Paul writes from a jail cell. “It has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ,” he says in the beginning of his letter. Paul, the once well-respected and powerful religious leader, a Pharisee even, is now a prisoner, a criminal. He must have had his own situation in mind, as he wrote to the Philippians about some disputes they are having within the church.

Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 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.

I know this will come as a shock to many of you, but there have been times in my life when I have needed to be reminded of the Christian virtue of humility.

In a graduate seminar when I was a student, one day I was recounting to the class my work as a hospital chaplain. I was telling the class how we used to do weekly overnight shifts, and much of that work was done in the trauma center. Throughout the night, my beeper would go off when a patient came in by ambulance or helicopter, and I would walk to the three-bed trauma unit off the end of the Emergency Department. I would go and stand in the corner of the room while the patient was brought in. If you’ve ever worked or been a patient in a trauma unit, you know the process is dramatic, to put it kindly.

The patient’s clothing is cut off of them. They are examined from head to toe for signs of injury or ailment. Senior doctors are yelling out instructions. Junior doctors and nurses are calling out their findings. Sometimes, police accompanied the patient in handcuffs; a few times a gun was found on the patient. Many times, a patient came in with a EMT straddling their chest, pushing chest compressions.

Like I said, the chaplain would stand in a corner, witnessing all of this, and, once the initial checks had been done and things were stable, when possible, I would talk with the patient, offer whatever care I could, or contact a loved one to let them know they were at our hospital.

I don't remember why I brought that up to my class at Vanderbilt. I remember closing the story by noting that when I was a chaplain, I was always a bit jealous of the doctors and nurses examining the patient. I felt sidelined. I wanted to be in the center of the action.

I'll never forget how my professor responded. Dr. Barbara McClure, was one of my doctoral advisors, a feminist pastoral theologian, someone I appreciate and greatly admire. She said, "I wonder, Richard, if that has anything to do with you being a white man. Because men often expect to be in the center of things."

For the longest time, that remark didn't feel fair to me. But now, a decade or more later, after my years as a trauma chaplain are over, I see her point. Because my envy of the doctors, my desire to be at the center, my resentment at being on the side, that all clouded, in a very real way, my estimation of what and where God was calling me in those years: as a pastor, as a care-giver, as a chaplain. It wasn't until later, now that it's gone, that I see exactly the opportunity God was giving me, by calling me to be a chaplain in that room. And I almost missed it.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.

Paul's plea for humility would have had a dramatic effect on his Philippian audience. In their highly stratified Hellenistic culture, humility was something reserved for slaves and persons of low birth. Pride was not a moral failing; it was a virtue, and humility was reserved for those who couldn't have it.

So, to support this radical request, he quotes what many scholars believe to be an ancient hymn not written by Paul himself.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

Theologians call this the *Kenosis* hymn, *kenosis* being the Greek word Paul uses for “emptying”; Christ *emptied himself, taking the form*, not of God, but of a man without a home, a misunderstood, maligned, ultimately condemned savior.

Paul writes from prison, to a divided and proud people, asking in the most shocking way possible, for the church to be of the same mind as Christ.

And his words still ring true. We still get in our way. Pride certainly can become a stumbling block to our communities today just as it was for the Philippians.

But the problem, as one commentator I read this week puts it, is that “What starts out a countercultural, can easily become the status quo.”¹ Because humility can be weaponized in church.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

- What happens to this passage after the name of Christ is used to enslave rather than liberate?
- To silence those whom God calls rather than to amplify voices pushed to the margin?
- To maintain unjust systems rather than create empowering spaces?
- To keep authority in the hands of the few rather than spread God’s liberating love?

Think of all those called to lead or to minister, but stifled in the name of humility, because their denomination didn’t ordain women, didn’t ordain gay and lesbian clergy, didn’t encourage people of color into leadership.

Think of all the social justice movements told to wait, often by the church, in the name of civility.

In humility, regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but the interests of others.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

The mind of Christ. What is the mind of Christ?

¹ Elizabeth M. Bounds, “Philippians 1:1-13,” in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year A*, Vol. 3. Joel B. Green et. al (Eds). (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 345-347.

Two millennia later and half a world away from Paul, in another jail cell, in another letter, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote a response to an open letter entitled “A Call to Unity” penned by eight prominent white clergymen in Birmingham, Alabama. Their call to unity was a call to end protest against segregation and racial oppression, to stop disturbing the peace and let the courts handle it. One of the signatories was the moderator of the Alabama Synod of the Presbyterian Church in the United States.

From his jailcell, King penned his now famous Letter from Birmingham Jail.² It is a treatise against submission to political oppression in the name of religious humility. If you’ve never read it in its entirety, I recommend it to you. I will read two paragraphs. King writes,

I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that [our] great stumbling block in [our] stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises [us] to wait for a "more convenient season."

A bit later in the letter, King wrote about the mind of Christ:

Though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." ...So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be.

² Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”
https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?

Or, if I can paraphrase Dr. King, in other words,
Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

It can be so difficult to discern the mind of Christ, when Scriptures such as these have been used and warped in many, often abusive ways.

But this is clear. Christ's self-emptying was not an erasure of everything he stood for. Remember what Christ said in our passage from Matthew. He stood up to the religious leaders of his day, and told them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him." The mind of Christ.

And if that is the mind of Christ, then the harmony and humility that Paul called for was not acquiescence to hegemony or the status quo. Remember Paul too wrote his letter from a jail cell.

On this World Communion Sunday, how are we called to be of the same mind as Christ?

It is a call to lay down that which separates us from our siblings in Christ around this world.

We remember, that this Table is not an American Table.

It isn't a Presbyterian Table.

It is not even *our* Table.

It is God's table.

There are no fences here. No gates.

Rather, at this Table, God calls us to empty ourselves,
Of pride, shame, prejudice, and apathy.

So that we may walk in this world, in ways that treat and empower everyone as God's beloved, including ourselves,
worthy of recognition, dignity, life abundant.

This is not a table of the status quo.

This is a table love, grace, resilience, mercy, even protest, even, and especially, change.

So, come. Let us prepare ourselves, to meet Christ at the Table.