

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon
September 25, 2011
Philippians 2.1-13
"Emptied. Exalted"
Pastor John Guthrie

A particular church had a man named Ben in the choir who simply couldn't sing: he was constantly off-key, flat, late, early or in some other way detrimental to the excellence of the choir. Several members of the church hinted to him that he could and should serve in other places, but he continued to practice and sing with the choir. The choir director became desperate and went to the pastor. "You've got to get Ben out of the choir," he said. "If you don't, I'm going to resign. The choir members are going to quit too. Please do something." So the pastor went to see Ben and suggested, "Perhaps you should leave the choir." "Why?" Ben asked. "Well, five or six people have told me you can't sing." "That's nothing, Pastor," Ben snorted. "Fifty people have told me that you can't preach!"

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, the second chapter, there is a brief poem, which many commentators believe was actually a first-century hymn that was sung by some of the churches in Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey. The hymn, which is a song of praise to Christ and God the Father, has two parts. The hymn states that Christ was in the form of God, but then emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born as a man, who then humbled himself and obeyed even to the point of dying on a cross. That's the first part. Then, the hymn continues, God the Father highly exalted him, giving him a name above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth should bend, and every tongue confess that he is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. That's the second part. Jesus first emptied himself, humbled himself, became fully obedient. Then the Father highly exalted him.

The letter to the church at Philippi is a letter filled with encouragement for the Christ-followers in that place. Indeed, from beginning to end Paul reminds the Philippians of the grace they have received through Christ Jesus and strives to give them hope and confidence in Christ.

If you read the letter to the Philippians carefully, you will find evidence throughout that Paul loves and cares deeply for his friends in that city. In chapter one he writes, "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now." Philippians is recognized among all of Paul's letters as the one written to a church about which Paul feels great pride and joy.

Something is threatening the unity of that church, and Paul writes to head off dissension and division. Paul is rooting for these Philippians, in the same way that we root for our favorite sports teams. He offers encouragement, hope, and correction.

This hymn that Paul reproduces at the beginning of chapter two is a reminder to his Philippian friends that Jesus humbled himself even to the point of a shameful and horrific death, only to be exalted by the Father. The Philippians are encouraged to follow in the way of Christ Jesus.

The church that Jesus ordained to carry his name and message forward after his death and resurrection has struggled long and hard over the centuries to make sense of just who Jesus is.

One of the problems is that different New Testament authors apparently see him in different ways. That is not a criticism of their writings and it is certainly not a criticism of Christ. It simply means that the writers of the gospels and letters had different experiences of Christ, just as you and I have. Their testimony weaves a rich and beautiful tapestry, giving us deep insight into who Jesus is and how we are called to live as his disciples.

This rich and wonderful hymn, while it does indeed reveal something of the deep mysteries of Christ, is not just about Christ. It is a message to the church in Philippi, and to us, about how we are to live together as his church. We are to be of the same mind, to have the same self-sacrificing love, to be in full accord, to avoid doing things from selfish ambition or conceit, to regard, in humility, others as better than ourselves, not looking to our own interests but rather to the interests of others. In other words, we are to have the same mind as Jesus, who is praised in the hymn.

In the midst of his nonviolent struggle for the liberation of the nation of India, Mahatma Gandhi once said, "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." Our first impulse is to take offense at this rather blatant criticism from an outsider. But if we stop for a moment and ask how ourselves how we're doing, as individuals and as a fellowship of believers, some of our indignation is pretty quickly erased. How are we doing at being of the same mind and in full agreement? How are we doing at having the same love? How are we doing at avoiding selfish ambition or conceit, at regarding others as better than ourselves? At looking to the interests of others rather than our own?

It would be irresponsible of me to avoid the difficult issue that dedicated Christ-followers disagree with each other all the time over church issues and other issues. I can guarantee you that I read articles all the time, written by people who love Jesus deeply, whose theses and arguments I find wrong or offensive. I know you do, too. What are we to do in these circumstances?

I believe we are to remember those many passages of scripture, not just here in Philippians chapter 2, in which we are commanded to be in unity. Those passages are everywhere in scripture. Everywhere. But if we can't agree on some issues, in what way are we one? In what way are we in full accord and of one mind?

Being in full accord and of one mind does not mean agreeing on every possible issue. It didn't mean that in the Philippian church in 60 AD, and it doesn't mean that for us today. Rather, it means remembering who it is that has been highly exalted. It means bending the knee before him, and confessing him and him alone as Lord of our lives. Jesus knows we don't and can't agree on every issue. He simply calls us to follow. Paul calls us to be Christ-like in our relationships with each other. That means that we differ with one another in love. It doesn't mean, necessarily, that we surrender on issues over which we differ. But we very carefully decide whether the differences are worth injuring the relationship with others and with the fellowship of believers, the church.

Whenever we ordain and install new officers, our constitution requires that we ask them to answer this question: "Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?" Martha and Steve will answer that question here in a few minutes. That all sounds very wonderful, but think for just a minute about that question. How hard is it really to hold those three objectives in balance? If you or I feel very strongly about some issue within the church, will we choose the side of purity (assuming we have correctly determined what that means) which may lead to division, or will we choose the side of peace and unity, which may require us

to compromise in some way on our understanding of purity? What do we do when peace and unity come into conflict with purity? That happens all the time in the church, by the way. It always has.

These are not easy questions. There are scriptural instructions on both sides of this issue. I believe that we are called to live in peace and unity until the Holy Spirit convinces us that the issue at hand threatens the faithfulness and witness of the church. Then things become serious. Do you see how difficult Paul's instructions to the Philippians are? And how difficult Jesus' commandments to be in unity are, as found in John's gospel and elsewhere? Thus we are to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. Always reminding ourselves that our own salvation is not worked out by us, but is a free gift of grace in Christ Jesus: note that Paul adds, "for it is God who is at work in you..." What that salvation means, how we appropriate it, how we make it ours, how we live it, how we follow the living Christ: those things we have to work out, in concert with other believers and led by the Holy Spirit of God.

One contemporary theologian¹ has noted that when he reads the New Testament, two things become apparent regarding the church: (1) The church is God's instrument for accomplishing God's mission on the earth; (2) Something seems to have gone terribly wrong with than instrument. The church is flawed and broken and unfaithful and petty and divided, but we are still God's instrument.

For all of the ways that we fail to be what Christ calls us to be, we remain his chosen instrument. The Holy Spirit still acts in and through us to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth, and to our neighbors in Cedar City. We must always give thanks for the Father who has watched over and provided for us from the time of Abraham to the present, for the Son who suffered, died and was raised so that hope will never die, and for the Holy Spirit who remains with us even in all of our failures.

Christ emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, humbled himself and became obedient even to the point of death on a cross. In return, his Father exalted him and gave him a name above every name, so that every knee should bend at the sound of that name, and every tongue confess him as Lord.

So we are to empty ourselves, take the form of slaves, humble ourselves and become obedient to whatever the Father may call us to do or to be. We are to be like Christ. Indeed, Martin Luther said we are all "little Christs." If Jesus did these things, so we are to do them as well.

No one said it was going to be easy. There's something about the commandment to bear our crosses which gives that away. But then we have the incomparable joy of belonging to Christ, the joy of calling him ours, and of having him call us his. Then we get to sing the ancient hymn in this passage, too, along with all the saints. "Jesus Christ is Lord, to the Glory of God the Father." Amen.

¹ Douglas John Hall, *Confessing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996, p. 101.