

WPC
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October 25, 2009

The Source of our Salvation
Philippians 1:27-2:4; 2:5-11

This is now the third in our series of sermons on Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul writes from a Roman prison to the first church he established in Europe. One reason Paul wrote this letter is because there was some friction in the Philippian church. In our reading this morning, Paul reminds the Philippians about the source of their salvation. In the midst of telling the Philippians how they as Christians ought to conduct themselves within the believing community, Paul gives an example in the form of a hymn of how Christ conducted himself. This hymn stands as one of his most familiar works. It shows us that in order to know who we are, we must first know who Jesus Christ is.

Let's take a closer look at our text. In this section of his letter, Paul is giving advice to the Philippians on Christian conduct, and in the midst of giving this advice, he shares a marvelous illustration of how in Jesus Christ God humbled himself in order to save us.

In v. 1:27, Paul writes, "Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." The word translated 'manner of life' = political, public,

civic life; literally, it means to conduct your citizenship/discharge your obligations as citizens in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. As Fred Craddock observes, "The church is not to hide nor apologize for its existence." (Craddock, 33). Eugene Peterson paraphrases this same verse as "live in such a way that you are a credit to the Message of Christ." We can only do so if we know who we are and hang on to our identities in the midst of life's pressures.

And we are not to live our lives and face life's challenges alone. Paul says we are to 'strive side by side' - *sunathleo*, athletic image, of fellow athletes striving side by side as one team.

In v. 1:28, Paul tells us not to be 'intimidated' by our opponents - Craddock notes that this Greek word means to be startled or spooked and is used to describe horses who stampede when they panic. Paul is saying: don't be startled, surprised, or alarmed. Be unflappable, don't panic, and think clearly in the midst of turmoil. Paul's use of athletic imagery is helpful - how does a team play on an opponent's field or court in front of a hostile crowd? By not panicking, by staying focused on the game plan, and by striving side by side with your teammates.

Paul then goes on in C. 2 to tell the Philippians, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit." The word for 'conceit' is the word *kenodoxa* =

keno (empty) + *doxa* (glory, praise; doxology - glory/praise we say to God); therefore, conceit literally means ‘empty glory.’ What an amazing insight into what conceit is – conceit is empty glory, hollow praise, the praise you heap on yourself because you’re so impressed with yourself, even if no one else is.

The reason I wanted to share this Greek word is because Paul is going to do a word-play in a little while with this phrase *kenodoxa*, empty glory. So stay tuned!

After telling the Philippians to do nothing from conceit, Paul says, “but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” I’ll talk in more detail about what this means shortly, but at this point I wanted us to see that Paul uses Jesus Christ as an example of ultimate humility in the illustration that follows, where he shares a hymn about the nature of Jesus.

Jesus, though he was in the form of God, emptied himself –again, the word *keno* (empty) is used; but as opposed to *kenodoxa*, conceit or empty glory, Jesus here emptied himself of claims to glory. This is why theologians sometimes call this hymn the *kenosis hymn*, because it speaks of Jesus emptying himself and taking on the form of a slave.

Not only did Jesus empty himself, he also humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore,

God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of *Jesus* (notice - not Christ, which is his title), “every knee should bow and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory (*doxa*) of God the Father.”

Now we see the play on words that Paul employs. Instead of *kenodoxa*, empty glory, Christ emptied himself, *keno*, of claims to glory, with the result that all should confess that he is Lord, to the glory, *doxa*, of God the Father. Thus, we end up with the complete opposite of *kenodoxa*, or empty glory/conceit. Instead Christ empties himself with the purpose of giving glory to God.

This hymn from Philippians is probably among the most famous and familiar writings of Paul. Ancient as it is, its message is timely and relevant even today. It's vitally important to know who we are. And we simply must know who Jesus Christ is, because our faith depends on it.

I'd like to make two reflections on our text. First, this passage shows that Paul can't speak of any subject without returning to the source of his faith. Although the main subject at hand was how the Philippian Christians were to conduct their daily lives, here he pauses with an entire hymn on the character and person of Christ. Jesus Christ infuses his whole being, his whole manner of life. We can learn a great deal from Paul's example. It's

been said that one problem with the church is that we're trying to make Christians relevant without first making ourselves into Christians. Like Paul, we need to first be grounded in the source of our salvation before we can reach out to others.

My second reflection has to do with what Paul means when, after telling the Philippians to do nothing from conceit, he says, “but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” This sentence has been misunderstood by some people. What does Paul mean? Does he mean that you should consider that you don't have any value and other people have more value than you have? Is that what Paul's saying? Is that what Christian humility is – that I'm supposed to feel very badly about myself and at the same time feel that everybody else is of greater worth?

No, that's not what he means. Actually, commentators have discovered that he's using a 1st Century saying that his readers would understand. Paul doesn't mean regard others as better in a qualitative sense; he means better in terms of position. What Paul is saying is he wants them to encourage one another; instead of being conceited, he wants them to act with humility by putting others ahead of themselves.

What can this look like in our lives? Well, there's an event that happened recently in the state of Washington that exemplifies what Paul is

saying in this passage. [SHOW VIDEO CLIP OF CENTRAL WASHINGTON SOFTBALL]

When we experience Jesus' love, we feel so good about ourselves that we're able to share that love and put others ahead of us. Acting with humility doesn't mean being a doormat for people to step on. It means we're able to focus on the interest of others because we know that we are beloved by God.

It makes a huge difference knowing that we are beloved. In a Sports Illustrated article about this incident, I learned a lot about Mallory Holtman, the Central Washington softball player who came up with the idea of carrying her opponent around the bases after she was injured, even though that meant her team was one step closer to being eliminated from the playoffs: "She has a brother and father who will let nothing harm her. [And] she has a mother and sister who affirm her without condition."¹

This is not a person with low self-esteem. This is a person who is so secure in her belovedness that she is able to put a fallen opponent ahead of herself and in the process remind us that goodness and decency and honor still exist. I don't know if Mallory Holtman is a Christian, but she certainly acted like one during the last softball game of her college career.

¹"The Way It Should Be," Sports Illustrated, June 29, 2009, p.62.

The love of God helps us to show that kind of humility. Our example is Jesus, who emptied himself by being born in human likeness, and not only became human, but even took the form of a slave, which was the lowest rung on the social ladder in the Roman Empire. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.

He could have taken the easy way out. He could have listened to the disciples and not gone into Jerusalem, thereby avoiding the danger that awaited him. He could have succumbed to the temptations of the devil and become a political savior, riding his tremendous popularity to the heights of earthly power. Instead, he chose to stay rooted in what God had called him to do despite the extraordinary cost.

Therefore God also highly exalted him, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.