

Street Clothes and a Hat

Text: Philippians 2:5-11

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on November 22, 2020

I don't know about you, but as I look at the world right now, I find it easy to lose my balance. Up is down, right is wrong, and human suffering from both natural and human causes is beyond my ability to absorb. I feel unmoored. In such times, Christians often look to the comfort of our traditions to find our way, and today gives us two traditions that I actually find pretty helpful, especially when considered together.

The first, of course, is Thanksgiving. Searching for things we can be thankful for, especially in difficult times, can help us from going down the rabbit hole of despair. And that's not just true for those who have a lot; it's helped people in even the worst of circumstances. Years ago I read the remarkable story of Corrie ten Boom, the Dutch Christian whose family helped Jews flee the Nazis during WWII. She and her sister Betsie were arrested for that work and sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Betsie died in the camp, but Corrie lived to write about her experience in a bestseller called *The Hiding Place*.

In that book, Corrie often speaks of the exceptional faith of her sister. The moment that encapsulates that for me is when Betsie declares that she's thankful for the fleas that infested the building where she and Corrie and many other women were housed. Why? Because the fleas were so bad that the guards wouldn't come in, and therefore the women in that building were free of the guards' abuses. Betsie died in that camp, imprisoned for putting her Christian faith into action by helping Jews flee persecution and death. She had every right to be bitter and angry. And yet she died in the glow of faith, feeling gratitude for God's gift of fleas.

When we search for things for which we can be grateful and give thanks instead of focusing on the hardships and things we can't have in these times, we grow spiritually. That, in turn, improves our emotional lives, which improves our relationships and provides a positive example for others. Thanksgiving—not as a dinner, but as a practice—is extremely helpful right now.

But for those of us whose lives aren't as desperate as Betsie's; for those of us who don't have to worry about where our next meal is coming from, who have a roof over our heads, who have jobs and, for many, power, privilege, and more wealth than most of the world, giving thanks can unintentionally lead us to think that we have what we have because we are better than those who have less. We say things like, "There but for the grace of God go I," which sounds kind and empathetic but actually implies that God's grace is with us—as evidenced by our lack of need—but not with those poor suckers we're looking at. When we have much, our thankfulness can easily become *comparative* thankfulness—like the Pharisee in Luke 18:11 who thanked God that he was not like the sinners around him. Jesus ends that story by condemning the braggart and saying, "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

It's humility that keeps the virtue of gratitude from becoming the vice of pride, and the other tradition we celebrate today helps us better understand the nature of humility. Next Sunday begins the church season called Advent, which is the time the church sets aside to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Christ Child on Christmas. Although Advent comes at the close of our calendar year, it's actually the beginning of the Christian year. Symbolically, Christians begin the year at the place we hope to begin our lives...preparing for Christ to come into our hearts. We then march through the rest of the Christian year following the life and teachings of Jesus, marking certain Sundays to remember different events in Christ's life—his baptism in January, then Holy Week, Easter, his Ascension, the Spirit coming at Pentecost, etc. until it all comes to a close, today, the last Sunday of the Christian year.

On this final Sunday we remember what we proclaim every time we celebrate Communion: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. We call it Christ the King Sunday or the Reign of Christ Sunday. It remembers that the story that began on Christmas has yet to be finished; and that what Jesus did here on earth has earned him a name that is above every name. When all is said and done, when God's kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven, Jesus will reign. But what does that mean, and how does it help us?

Just about every one of the injustices and divisions we face today have their roots in different approaches to power and authority—whether power is being correctly or incorrectly used. Law enforcement, border control, the influence given to money, celebrity, and media; the power of citizenship, the Presidency, the courts, and both chambers of Congress; how to use the various privileges we have when confronted with those who don't have the same kind of access that we do. It's all about power—who gets it or doesn't, who shares it and who doesn't, what power correctly used looks like, and who has the power to decide and enforce those answers.

With families both literally and figuratively torn apart over issues of power and authority, in swoops this last Sunday of the Christian year to remind us that, actually, Jesus is the one who has the power to decide and enforce those answers, and if we follow his teachings, the justice that the Reign of Christ promises us in the end can begin to be present now. That's why I picked what many believe is the earliest hymn in the Christian Church as the Scripture lesson for today—the passage that describes the “mind of Christ” in Philippians 2:5-11. When living under the Reign of Christ, it will be the mind of Christ that runs the show, and it is the job of each one of us to help usher in that reign by cultivating the mind of Christ within ourselves. Here and now.

The key to it all is in verses 6-8. Speaking of Jesus, Paul says, “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. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” In short, the most fundamental characteristic of the “mind of Christ” is humility, which is how Jesus taught us to exercise whatever power and authority we have.

When we hear the word humility today, many tend to confuse it with weakness and groveling. We talk about people of “humble means” or “humble beginnings,” meaning they don't have much. But that's a distortion of what biblical humility is all about, as this passage makes clear. Biblical humility is having both the right and the power to have it all, yet giving it up—either temporarily or permanently—for a greater cause. Humility is what happens when love exercises power. It seems to be in fairly short supply these days, but we're not without examples.

I will never forget the first time that I saw the Queen of England on television. I knew that England had a Queen long before I ever saw her, and my mind was instantly filled with all the images of queens that I had ever read about. They might be old and wise, or young and rebellious, or even beautiful and mean like the Queen in Snow White. But every last one of them wore jeweled crowns, long layered gowns in expensive fabrics, and ermine-trimmed robes or satin capes. You can imagine my dismay when I first saw Queen Elizabeth walking around London in street clothes and a hat. I mean, why be Queen if you're going to go around in street clothes and a hat?

The issue I had with the Queen is the same issue that many have with God becoming a human being. God has glory and power. We imagine thrones and golden streets and mansions—we sing about those things regularly. What good is being God if you're going to go around in street clothes and a hat? The great God becomes a human baby? A human baby in a poor family? A human baby from a poor family in an occupied country? Born in a stable? We are mystified and a tad bit disappointed. We expected better from the Almighty.

Another example is former President Jimmy Carter, a cancer survivor, at 96 years old out sawing wood for a Habitat for Humanity house, right alongside his 93-year-old wife. As a former president, Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter could do whatever they want, wherever they want. And in their 90's no one would begrudge them a relaxing retirement in a comfortable, even luxurious home. They have a right to that. They have the power to have that. But every day they wake up and choose instead to put on street clothes and a hat and serve the people. Humility is not having no power or privilege. That's oppression. Humility is giving up power and privilege for the sake of a greater good.

But you don't need the power of a Queen or President to show humility. In 2017 I read about a man in Orlando, FL who was checking out with the very last generator at Lowe's as hurricane Irma was headed their way. The woman behind him had traveled 30 miles, desperate to find a generator to keep her father's oxygen running. When she saw there were no more, she burst into tears. And the man who got the last one turned around, saw her distress, and gave his to her. He didn't have to. He had gotten there in time and had the right to purchase what he had secured. He might have thanked God for his good fortune and said to himself, "There but for the grace of God go I." But he saw a need greater than his own and gave up both the generator and comfort for days to come. I have no idea whether the man professed to be a Christian or not. I do know that he had the mind of Christ.

On this one Sunday every year we have the reminder that if you want to rule the world, you have to be willing to serve it and die for it first. The message of Jesus' birth is that God loved us enough to give up the benefits of divinity and become one of us. But the disturbing message of Philippians is that God is asking us to do the same. Right at the beginning of the passage is this frightening little sentence that reads: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." It's easy to let someone else give up power, glory, or the last generator in the face of a destructive storm and cheer them on. We get all misty-eyed when we read about it from the comfort of our warm, fully-electrified homes. But how often do we take the humble path ourselves? How often do we give up something we have the full right and power to keep because the love and gratitude in our hearts simply can't be contained?

In the Kingdom of God, Jesus says, the first shall be last; but that's not because God boots those at the front to the back of the line. It's because those with the mind of Christ are humble enough to step back from their front-row perch and say, with both love and gladness, "No, you go ahead." Or, "Here, take my seat." Where does that humility come from? Love. I'll say it again, humility is what happens when love uses power. Our battles today are, at their core, all about power; and this is the one day in the Christian year that reminds us that the full-throated power of Almighty God is available only to those who exercise whatever authority they have been given with love. Power without love is tyranny.

Love doesn't dictate specific policies; we'll always have plenty to debate when considering how to achieve our goals as individuals, churches, or nations. But as Christians, this Sunday reminds us that those ultimate goals we strive for must include just as much love for others as for ourselves, because we are modeling the Love that gave it all up for us when God came to us in street clothes and a hat on Christmas. And for that Love, we give thanks. Amen.