

THE MIND OF CHRIST

TEXT: PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on May 8, 2022

This week we're continuing on with the second of three key ways we can participate in God's Easter work of turning death into life. If you imagine concentric circles, we began last Sunday in the center with the ability to embrace death; both literally and figuratively. The cross is the heart of Christian faith, doctrine, and practice. Moving out one ring from that center is today's focus: To embody service.

We think we know what service is; and, in its most basic sense, we do. It's doing something for someone else. But that definition alone doesn't always turn death to life. The forced service of enslaved Africans in this country did exactly the opposite and the fallout from centuries of such a heinous sin is still bringing death today. But it doesn't have to be as egregious as slavery to see the problem with defining service solely as the act of doing something for someone else.

What if we're paid to do it or benefit in some other way? What if we do it grudgingly out of guilt or for selfish reasons? Does the recipient of our service matter? What if we're serving someone who doesn't really need it or may not even want it? Does the recipient have to be happy about how we serve them to have it count? Can service reach a point of becoming harmful instead of helpful? Where is the line between serving and enabling? Who decides which it is? Suppose serving my country means refusing to serve my family? Or vice versa? And how many of you feel new life after an hour on the phone with a customer service representative?

We might call it all "service," but clearly the kind of service Jesus embodied and told his disciples to practice isn't just about the act itself. We don't turn death into life just by doing this thing or not doing that. Whether our actions ultimately produce death or life is determined by what's happening in our hearts as we do them. If our hearts are in the wrong place, someone might still benefit from any given act of service. But there will be a corrosive effect over time—either in ourselves or in others—and frequently both. To "embody service" means that both our inner spirit and our outer actions are working together for the sake of others.

Jesus has a ton of teaching about this that is scattered across the gospels in lots of parables, teaching, and action. But I think the heart of embodied service is described most succinctly not by Jesus but rather by Paul in one of the most famous passages about Jesus in the Bible. It's the passage I just read from Paul's letter to the Philippians about the mind of Christ. But before we dive into the passage itself, I want to set some context.

The book of Philippians is a letter Paul sent to the church he had established years before in the Greek city of Philippi, a Roman colony. We learn in chapter 16 of the book of Acts that the church in Philippi met in the home of a woman named Lydia, who ran a luxury textile business, dealing in purple cloth. That detail is important, since it meant that Lydia, and therefore the church in her home, likely would have been known to Roman royalty and Senators, who were required to have a purple band around the edge of their togas or robes. Purple was a hard and expensive dye to make. There were not purple cloth vendors on every corner in the empire. More from that chapter of Acts in a moment.

Also relevant is what we learn in the first chapter of Paul's letter to her church: Paul is writing this letter from prison, and he believes his execution will be coming relatively soon. He's not making that up or being melodramatic. Paul was in fact beheaded by Rome, probably in Rome, somewhere around the year 67, during the reign of Emperor Nero. Further, the last line of chapter one implies that similar conditions either exist currently or will likely exist soon for Lydia's church in Philippi. Nero's brutal torture and persecution of Christians is well known, and Lydia's profession would have made it difficult to fly under the radar.

So, Paul is writing to the Philippians while he is literally in prison, actually suffering, and facing imminent execution. He is writing to people he loves and for whom he feels responsibility and closes the first chapter telling them, "For God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ but of suffering

for him as well, since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.” Two things to note there.

First, Paul expresses a mindset that is not at all common in the church today—especially in the United States. Suffering for Christ, Paul says, is a privilege; and by “suffering” he doesn’t mean wearing a mask on public transportation. He’s talking “in prison awaiting your execution” suffering. He’s not encouraging the church in Philippi to run out and get themselves arrested and killed to gain some kind of privilege. He’s not telling them to hurt others and claim they’re helping them be better through their suffering. He’s not talking about self-abuse to somehow become more holy.

Second, Paul is writing to people who “have the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.” At least some receiving the letter are in the same boat as Paul is, and in chapter two he’s giving them a coping mechanism for dealing with the persecution being imposed on them for their faith.

And what is that coping mechanism? To remember the example of Jesus. To remember the mocking, torture, and execution of the one you have professed to follow and how his endurance and suffering turned death into life. Now is the time to become true disciples, he is saying. Now is the time to mold your mind after the mind that Jesus had, so that you are able to endure what Jesus endured and share in his reward. Hold each other up. Be of one mind—with each other and with Jesus. See it as a privilege to suffer as Christ did and, in so doing, to join his work of turning death into life for the world.

And then Paul shows both his compassion and his brilliance by quoting what is the oldest known hymn of the early Christians in verses 6-11 of chapter two. But to understand why this is so brilliant here, we have to jump back to Acts 16. In verses 11-15 of that chapter we learn about Lydia, her conversion and baptism, and the way she opened her home for Paul and a new Christian community in Philippi.

In verses 16-18 Paul and his missionary partner, Silas, drive a demon out of an enslaved fortune teller, which eliminates the significant income of her owners, who respond by having Paul and Silas flogged and thrown in jail. While in jail, Paul and Silas spent their time praying and singing hymns. In Acts 16 verses 25-34, God causes an earthquake that shatters their chains and opens the jail doors. But then something unexpected happens.

The jailer is about to take his own life because the prisoners escaped on his watch, when Paul and Silas stop him and say, “No worries, Mr. Jailer! We’re still here!” That really blows the jailer’s mind. He falls at their feet, accepts Jesus, and is baptized on the spot along with his entire household. Paul then takes the jailer and his family and introduces them to Lydia, who welcomes them into the Christian community meeting in her home in Philippi, the very people who would years later receive Paul’s letter, that we now call the Book of Philippians, and that quotes a hymn in chapter two.

The distinguished New Testament scholar Raymond Brown has suggested that the hymn in Philippians 2 may well have been one of the hymns Paul and Silas were singing at the time of the earthquake in that jail cell. A hymn that, given the circumstances, he may well have taught the church in Philippi, maybe when introducing the jailer to them and telling their story.

Since letters in Paul’s day were not read privately but were performed aloud for the recipients by the courier who brought it—in this case a Philippian church member named Epaphroditus—it’s even possible that Epaphroditus sang verses 6-11 for those who gathered in Philippi to hear Paul’s message. If they knew it, they might have joined in.

If Raymond Brown is right, the mood Philippians 2:6-11 evokes is the one created at Mother Emmanuel church in Charleston, South Carolina, at the funeral of their murdered pastor, Rev. Clementa Pinckney, when President Obama sang “Amazing Grace” during his eulogy. A common hymn, bringing comfort in its familiarity, and a reminder of their journey of faith and its consolation in a time of great trial.

Given that context, you could paraphrase the start of the chapter as, “So, given that we’re all suffering, with many of us imprisoned with potential executions in our future...if that’s the case, if people in our

circumstances are to find any consolation in Christ, in love, in sympathy with each other as we partner together in the Spirit; let's all meet this moment as Jesus himself did. Don't be selfish; don't let this be about you. Be humble and look out for each other. Remember the hymn I taught you? Remember how Jesus faced such a moment?

who, though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
assuming human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a human,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Here at the end of Paul's life, and likely at the end of the lives of some in the church at Philippi, the central message of being willing to embrace death that we talked about last week comes through. But here we also see the attitude of humility and service that makes such an embrace possible. It begins with a willingness to give up trying to be God.

The hymn says that Jesus refused to hang onto the form of God and instead took on the form of a servant by assuming human likeness. The human form is itself the form of a servant. Service is the human vocation. The point is not that some wretches should serve while their superiors rule. The point is that those who try to grasp at being God and believe themselves better than others have lost their humanity. They are trying to gain the whole world but are losing their souls in the process.

There is no room in the mind of Christ for any kind of supremacy. No white supremacy, no male supremacy, no nationalism, no exceptionalism, American or otherwise. Those are all forms of idolatry and a violation of the commandment to have no other gods. The mind of Christ is exactly the opposite, making all forms of human supremacy literally anti-Christ. You can understand why Nero was not fond of such a faith.

The mind of Christ takes us back before emperors and kings to Adam in the Garden so that we might remember that God gave Adam, as the proto-human, the job of serving and protecting the earth. The mind of Jesus, who Paul elsewhere calls the second Adam, means acknowledging that to be human means being called to serve as a fundamental part of our identity.

If we can lay out on our calendars the days and times of our service, we have missed the point. Service isn't what we do; it's who we are. With the mind of Christ, to live is to serve. We embody service. We serve in our work; we serve in our rest; we serve in our play; because in all of it we refuse to grasp at being God or to see ourselves as better than anyone else. We serve and protect the earth and everything and everyone in it; like Adam, like Jesus. To the death if necessary. Even death on a cross. The fulfillment of that calling to a life of service has an infinite number of forms but one mind. The mind of Christ. Amen.