

The Rev. Josh Stephens

St. John in the Wilderness

September 27, 2020

The Self-Emptying Love of God

Philippians 2:1-13

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: 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. 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.
And being found in human form,
he 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
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

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

It's a big God whom we worship. Our God has done a lot of big things over the ages -- a lot of huge things. We could talk about those things all morning and maybe we should. I don't

want to forget about God's creating word or God's deliverance of his people from bondage in Egypt. I don't want to forget about Jonah and the whale, King David dancing before the Lord, or Jeremiah ministering through the Babylonian captivity and beyond.

But if we were to simplify all of the big things that our big God has done over the ages into perhaps the biggest of them all -- if we were to break it down -- then we would be left with when God took on flesh in the person of Jesus Christ and when God raised Jesus from the dead. We would be left with our two biggest feasts: Christmas and Easter. Those are good times. Those are joyful times. God's ultimate revelation is INCARNATION and RESURRECTION.

Well this morning, St. Paul has us thinking about incarnation. Can you say that word with me? INCARNATION. Here is something so profound and beautiful that it changes hearts and changes communities. This is about God among us, God with us, God for us in the most loving and subversive way. Could it be that God was willing to empty God's self? Could it be that God's love is self-emptying by its very nature -- that it must be shared, must be given, must be poured out? This morning we get to step into the downward mobility of God.

I recently heard an interview with Shaine Claiborne. Shaine is a guy from East Tennessee who has found his life changed by this radical and self-emptying love of Jesus Christ. He has been living with the poor in Philadelphia in a semi-monastic Christian community for years now, which is as surprising to him as it would be for us if we were to do the same. As a young man, he was hoping to find a way to work *a little* and make *a lot* of money. He was hoping for success, stability, and a bit of upward mobility. Instead, Shaine found himself falling deeper and deeper in love with Jesus of Nazareth.

I recently heard Shaine say the following. Let's listen to this and think about it. I'll say it twice:

"If we find ourselves climbing the ladder of upward mobility, we better be careful or else on our way up we might miss Jesus on his way down."

Again, "If we find ourselves climbing the ladder of upward mobility, we better be careful or else on our way up we might miss Jesus on his way down."

This is what Philippians 2 is all about. It's that Christ Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to cling to but he emptied himself. He made his move from something heavenly and royal and splendid. God made the move *downward* to take the form of a servant, being born as one of us.

I also heard Shaine Claiborne recently say, "Everything that Jesus did was the most profound act of solidarity that the world has seen. That Jesus is literally exposing, absorbing all of the violence and hatred of the world, and unmasking it, putting it on display and subverting it with love." Here we find another part of what Paul is talking about in

Philippians 2. In Christ, God is exposing and unmasking the foolishness of our world and subverting it with love.

I cannot help this morning -- about a month before our presidential election -- but to hold up this image of Christ we hear about in Philippians 2 against the race for power that we see going on in our country right now. It's not that elections are unimportant, but sometimes I just take a step back from these races and find I'm disgusted by the vanity of it all. I think a little detachment should be encouraged, even as we do our part in the political process. For example, in the last presidential election, \$2.4 billion dollars was spent in the pursuit of power, as the candidates sought to become the so-called "Leader of the Free World."

And yet all of that money, all of the media coverage, all of the angst and division -- power being squeezed and sought after -- seems like folly compared to a poor suffering-servant named Jesus who wanted to spend time with tax collectors and prostitutes rather than politicians and religious leaders. The upward political climb of our day seems like "ash and dust for cash and lust" compared to the King of the Universe being raised up on a cross, completely in love with a world confused by violence, pride, and greed -- completely in love with me and with you. I have to tell you that in all my life and in all my reading of history, I have yet to have a relationship with a president of the United States that has changed my life like my relationship with Jesus of Nazareth. I'll call him King. I'll call him Lord. Let's follow him wherever he might lead us.

Paul tells his church in Philippi, a Roman colony where the Roman religion would have been treasured, where people would wave flags to Caesar and call him lord, to let this incarnational, self-emptying, unmasking, subverting love of Jesus take hold in their hearts and in their church. "If then there is any encouragement in Christ," he tells them, "any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: 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."

In fact, Paul writes saying, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." Or, let me put it to you this way, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Let Jesus into your hearts, into your homes, and into your church! Because, you know something, Jesus "...was in the form of God, [but] 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 [God 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 every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

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