

“In Humility, God Put You First” based on Philippians 2:1-15

Delivered on September 27, 2020 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

One of the reasons why it is important for us to do new translations of passages is not because the word of God has changed, but because the English language has. One of my favorite examples of this from 1 John, where ‘perfect love casts out all fear.’ The word perfect to us today likely means to us ‘without blemish’ as the primary meaning, but when this verse was first translated, it meant ‘complete,’ matching the Greek word, ‘telos.’ The Greek word did not change, nor did God’s word. But our language has.

So, I think that it is important to do fresh translations, not to say that what you have in your bible is not accurate or call into question the verses you have memorized and hold on to dearly. But fresh translations, looking at different translations, opens up our hearts for the Holy Spirit to work within us and through the text for its deeper meanings.

Now, when I saw this text in the lectionary for today, I thought about how in the house I grew up in, there was a little sign hanging up in our kitchen. It was mostly inconspicuous, light in color against unpainted plaster walls. It hung from a rarely used scone by our kitchen table. It looked like it might have an art project from one of us kids, with a stick like a tongue depressor on its top and bottom, hanging from a piece of brown yarn. I don’t remember where it had come from, yet it was there for as long as I can remember.

The little sign read, “I asked Jesus, ‘How much do you love me?’ He said ‘This much’ and he stretched out his arms and died.” To understand God’s love for us, we must understand the cross. But how can we find love in something like a crucifixion, the painful death that Rome imposed on slaves and rebels? The sentence of anyone who threatened the peace of the empire?

Friends, the passage I just read to you today from Paul’s letter to the Philippians is my favorite passage of scripture partly because for me, it answers this question. How, indeed, does the brutal crucifixion show us God’s love? How could something so awful, be so good and hopeful? The short answer: It was in humility, that God put you and me first.

Yes, the beautiful thing about the Creator of all things, is that the Creator, all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, is humble enough to have lived as we live, and die a death of humiliation, so that we might have glory.

I want to walk you through this text and share with you some of its wonder, and show you why we so often use it as one of our creeds in this church, by revealing the depth of its complex truths about God and us, and how that translates into how we live toward God and one another.

Paul is writing to the church at Philippi, knowing that this church is faithful to Jesus. So, when he says at the start of this passage, “if there is,” it is a turn of phrase. He says this knowing that there is in fact at this church an awareness of comfort in Christ, the comfort of love, and there is a common life of the Spirit and deep compassions, visceral feelings in your gut. Knowing this, Paul wants the church at Philippi, to see that this means they should be unified in belief, with the same love, and united as one church.

So, how do you unite as a church and bring the church into the world around you then? Paul's answer is to be like Jesus, meaning to regard others as better than yourself, not in order to get ahead, or to look good before others, but in humility. Because this is the humility that governed Jesus, the Messiah, who was from the beginning, before time, the One True God, yet in humility, regarded the welfare of us lowly humans first, coming down to share in our humanity.

To a Greek audience in Philippi, using 'morphe' or 'form' as Paul used it, would have likely called to mind the teachings of Plato and Socrates in the Republic, in which the forms are the true reality and what we see are shadows of them. Jesus is in true reality God, but did not come to earth to exploit that. No, he did not come as Zeus came in the Greek myths, to take advantage of beautiful maidens, or take from humans. No, God came to earth empty of that kind of power, to again be the true reality or form of a slave, in all the appearances of our humanity. Think about that. The One who made everything we see and did not come to exploit that power.

Merely by being in this condition, Paul says, Jesus humbled himself, and I love this next line, 'having become obedient unto death, even death on a cross.' The word here for 'obedient' is listening, like we would say to a child, listen to me. It's an active hearing and obedience. What is Jesus to? To whom or to what? To God? Surely, Jesus in this instance is obedient to His own divine rescue plan, but what's more, in humility, he listens to us and what it means to be one of us, sharing in our humanity.

God did not merely show up as a human being and retain all Godly prerogatives, but no, God came down to share in what it means to be a human in all its fullness, the pain we feel, the heartache, the challenges we face in everyday life. The One God who created all things, became part of this creation. Paul wants us to have this mind in how we deal with each other. If God is humble enough to be humiliated as a human slave, then we should be humble enough to listen to others, to put the needs of others before our own, and make sacrifices to help each other.

Christian service to one another is not done to earn God's favor, to earn salvation, or to earn anything else. This is a point Paul makes time and time again, but Christian service is a response to it. We do not serve God because the law says we will die if we do not, we serve God because God served us first. We love because God loved us first.

It is on account of this that God also elevates Jesus beyond measure in the resurrection, the hope that we have. Jesus is elevated, raised up on that cross and raised up from the grave for us, and graced with the name above every name. Paul says make no mistake, Jesus shares in the name of God, in the identity of God. Jesus is God. And so, at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in the heavens and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus the Messiah is Lord – the official title for God – to glorify God the Father.

There is a teaching in the more traditional Roman Catholic churches that at the name of Jesus, every believer should bow their head a little bit. This teaching comes from this passage in

Philippians, perhaps because bowing a head is easier to do every time you hear the name, rather than bending a knee.

In our tradition, we don't do this at all. I think that we miss something. Perhaps it is not taught because we have a tendency to look at this as something that will be done far in the future at another time, when all things are reconciled in the new creation or the heavens. But that's not what it says. It says we should do it now – hence the heavens, those on earth, and those under the earth.

We should have so much reverence for the name of Jesus that it affects us so much we stop and think about it. How can we bow in our lives? How can we pause for a second and think about that incredible humility of God to live like we live and have flesh like we have? To bow is a form of worship, so we might do well to consider how we can worship every time we hear that name, including when someone around us uses the name of Jesus as an expletive, even giving Jesus a middle initial he never had, 'H.' Think about how we can turn those moments into a prayerful moment of appreciation for what has been done for us.

So, Paul goes on to say, "Therefore, my beloved, just as always you have obeyed me, not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence, finish the work of your salvation with fear and trembling." Friends, I see here also how we can apply Paul's words to think about our relationship with God as well. Just as we would obey God if we were in the direct presence of God, like in the new creation, how much more right now should we seek to do that will of God, right now, by loving one another.

There is no planning needed. We can do this right now, simply with a smile to each other or someone we don't know, beneath our masks even. Even if it means being respectful to stores, businesses and churches by wearing our masks without making a big production. These are simple things we can do right now to regard others as better than ourselves.

God is the one who saves us, but we have a role to play. It's not that we earn it, but still we can put the finishing touches on it, with fear and trembling because it's not us, but God who is active within us. It's God whose will we follow and who activates us to make this world a better place. That is what God's good pleasure is. Paul says to do this without grumbling and debate, in order that you may be blameless and innocent 'children' of God. We saw this word this morning and it means willingly dependent. As children of God we choose to obey the God on whom we are willingly dependent, but who loves us and said yes to us before we had the opportunity to say yes to God.

Even if we are in a generation, which is crooked and corrupt, when we do this and are humble as God humbled God's self for us, doing the will of the Father, then we shine like lights declaring 'yes' to the God who loves us. This is our calling. Amen.