

Philippians 2:1-11

"The Great Example"

Going to a concert without your parents is a rite of passage – like when a young man shaves for the first time or a young lady gets her ears pierced. It is a mark of independence, a step closer to adulthood. When our daughter Katie was in the 8th grade, we let her and her best friend attend an "N Sync" concert without us at what was then called the BiLo Center, now the Well, in Greenville. There was much discussion among all four parents and so many arrangements made ahead of time that you would have thought we were planning a wedding.

Here's how it went down: Danny and I would drop them off and then have dinner at a club where we are members that is two blocks away. After the concert there are policemen that help concertgoers cross the street safely. We planned to linger over dessert and coffee and the girls would call us the minute they stepped out of the arena. Within 10 minutes, we should see them safe and sound. And the plan worked beautifully!

When I heard about the explosion at the Ariana Grande concert in Manchester, England, this passage in Katie's journey sprang to my mind. Ariana Grande, like N Sync in her day, is a star who attracts listeners from the tweens to young adulthood and I knew we would hear that children and young people had lost their lives. I cannot imagine the devastation I would have felt if we had dropped Katie off with a "be careful and mind your manners" and then never seen her alive again. It is every parent's worst nightmare.

But even as my heart broke for the tragedy that occurred last Sunday night, I also worried about how the aftermath would affect the emotions of every American citizen if Muslim extremists took responsibility. And of course, that fear was also realized. I had actually been

thinking about another passage for worship today, but as the suffering of those involved in this latest senseless violence continued to take up space in my heart, the Holy Spirit kept nudging me towards what is called "The Christ Hymn." In it I found comfort and a sense of direction about how to handle the emotions that welled up in me throughout the week.

Paul wrote this letter to the church at Philippi while in prison in Rome. He was chained to a guard 24 hours a day and most likely facing execution. Yet he wrote this letter of instruction, encouragement and thanksgiving to one of the churches he had helped establish. I tell you this because despite the circumstances, this letter is often referred to as the "Epistle of Joy". A reminder that God comes to us, even in the worst of times.

It seems that while in prison, Paul had heard that the new church was struggling with divisions. So his advice to them and to all of us is that, in order to overcome any obstacles in life, we can look to the Great Example that Jesus Christ left us in his living and in his dying. Paul does this by inserting a benediction that was sung in worship in those days, in much the same way I would quote the lyrics to an old hymn or, knowing me, a country song. And this is the Scripture that we just heard.

As I have listened to the sensationalism that our society seems to feed on and that the media is so glad to give us, I have thought about the impact The Christ Hymn would have on us all if we indeed lived according to the example Jesus left us. This would not leave room for being judgmental, for condemnation or for hatred. Instead Jesus teaches us that the essence of the Divine is to be sacrificial, humble and obedient. And above all else, it teaches us to love. So if we follow Paul's charge to be of the "same mind" as Christ Jesus, we have to seek and cultivate these qualities in our lives, no matter what is happening in the world around us.

As we celebrate Memorial Day weekend, we think a lot about the sacrifice that our soldiers have made for us since before this nation was established. Men and women have given up comforts, safety, time with family and sometimes even their lives so that we could live as we do today. In fact the heroes and heroines of our military that we honor today lived in a way that followed the Great Example that we are not asked to do. But we are called to sacrifice in other ways.

In order for us to understand Jesus' sacrifice, Paul uses the words "he emptied himself." This means that he gave up his Divine self in order to understand when it means to be human. What an expense. The first human, Adam, sinned because he wanted to be like the Divine, eating from the tree that would give him the knowledge of good and evil. Since that time we have been, by nature, self-seeking and self-centered. We too have wanted to be our own God at times. Maybe that is why Linus screamed in a Peanuts cartoon, "I love humanity – it's PEOPLE I can't stand!"

Jesus, however, willingly gave this Divinity up. He emptied himself in order to be completely empathetic to the feelings of judgment that we have when we people make choices that we wouldn't make. And because of Jesus' sacrifice, Divinity will always be linked with Jesus' choice to become one of the least of these. So we follow his example when we empty ourselves of pride, prejudice and judgmentalism.

By emptying himself, Jesus also set an example of what it means to be humble. In his book [The Life You've Always Wanted](#) John Ortberg calls humility "appropriate smallness". This is an apt description in today's world where society encourages us to live by slogans like "Because you're worth it", "Just do it" and "American by birth, Rebel by Choice". With people

being told at every level that we have been created to shine, it is easy to forget that Jesus Christ, the Great Example, teaches us to shine for God. Not ourselves.

Yet, to find a balance in our lives that calls attention to the good that we do while making it clear that it is only God's gifts in us that ENABLE and EMPOWER us to do good is often tricky. Most of us dangle somewhere between overconfidence and complete lack of faith in our own abilities. To meet someone with a healthy balance is rare. Winston Churchill once said, "We are all worms but I do believe I am a glowworm."

In truth, so many of us understand what it means to be humble. Humility is not about convincing ourselves or others that we are incompetent or unworthy. It is not about beating ourselves up. Again, John Ortberg says that "if God wanted to make us nothing, he could have done so." (1) Humility is about letting the Holy Spirit have complete control of our will and our lives. It is about seeking God's plan and not our own. It is about the freedom to stop trying to be something we are not and learning to be who God created and called us to be.

And of course, when we seek to be humble, this leads to obedience – especially when we are facing struggles. Anyone can be obedient when life is good. But if we are to give our will and our lives to God and humble ourselves to let God be God, this means that we are to rely on God in our lowest moments. When the routine visit to the doctor becomes a diagnosis of cancer, when the marriage falls apart through no fault of our own, when we don't get into the college of our choice or the addiction cannot be conquered or the down-sizing means a pink slip, do you think Jesus became a slave so we could try to be strong enough to bear this pain alone?

Well friends, this answer is no. Jesus Christ "emptied himself" at a price and for a reason. Therefore he calls us to be *humble* enough to accept our circumstances in life and *obedient* enough to give them over to the will of God. And because Jesus took up the cross, the

cross comes to each of us. When we give our pain to the God who emptied himself on our behalf, we are opened up to the ways that he sends us healing. Through friends who will listen so we won't bear our pain alone. Through the beauty of the robin feeding her young and the mystery of the ebb and flow of the tide. Through the laughter of children or the way that music or art or poetry fills our souls. The cross reminds us that, while life is often cruel and ugly, the God who emptied Himself on our behalf surrounds us with grace on every side, if we are humble and obedient enough to receive it.

Reading the Christ Hymn again this week reminded me that I have tried the other way. The way of thinking I am all that and a bag of chips and can figure out things just fine. And God humbled me when I would not humble myself and taught me to rely on God alone. And in doing so, gave the cross new meaning in my life.

Have you ever considered the irony that the symbol of our religion was originally a symbol of death? Other religions are known by symbols of beauty and light – the six-pointed star, the lotus, the crescent moon. Christianity's symbol is a symbol of death – the cross. The place where criminals were hanged and died. Yet, this symbol reminds us that God can turn something tragic into something wonderful and life-giving. And Christ set the example of sacrifice, humility and obedience so that when we live lives that follow, every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. That is the definitive point of Paul's words. And that is our ultimate goal. To live in a way that leads others to Christ.

When Danny and I went to the National Championship Football Game that Clemson won, by the way, we were standing with 75,000 of our closest friend trying to enter the stadium. And as we stood there, inching into the game that Clemson won, there was a man standing on a box with a handheld sound system preaching – no YELLING – about the idolatry of football.

Now I will admit that we spent some money on this trip that could have certainly been used in another way and I might even come close to idolizing my Tigers, but as he yelled at us all about wasting time and money that could be spent for God, I said out loud, "That is such bad evangelism". I mean did he really think that every knee would bow and tongue confess at that moment, after hearing his judgmental ranting?

This is not the Great Example that Christ set for us. Christ set the example love. Jesus put himself in our shoes, dwelt among us in all of our sinfulness and did so willingly so that God could be our advocate in every way. Not to judge us but to save us.

Thankfully, this is a kind of sacrifice that we will never have to truly understand. But today, we remember others who have sacrificed and will continue to do so. And I submit that their lives calls us to follow the Great Example of Jesus as well. To love.

Friends, the soldiers who in died in the Revolutionary War did not die so that all Americans would despise everything British. They died so that we might have freedom from tyranny. And in unity and through obedience, build a great nation.

The men and women who gave their lives protecting our freedoms during World War II did not sacrifice so that we would hate all Germans or refuse to let Jews make their homes here. The soldiers of the gulf War did not sacrifice so Americans would hate all Muslims. Our soldiers fought because they knew that they were fighting for something bigger than themselves, for a future that they believed in, the certainty that they were on the right side of history. And to choose to hate instead of seeking better solutions for justice, in a way invalidates all that our soldiers past and present have fought to protect.

And today as much as we agree and disagree and agree to disagree, I think we all believe that God did not empty himself of Divinity and dwell among us so that we could hate someone

because of where they were born, or how they choose to worship or the color of their skin or who they voted for. We know that every religion has fanatics and every nation has insane people. Yet God does not call us to judge those who choose to make a statement by killing innocent children who are enjoying a rite of passage in life. Instead, God in Christ calls us to follow the example of sacrifice, humility and obedience in the name of righteousness. God calls us to love. And then, and only then, will every knee bow and tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Amen.

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Nazareth Presbyterian Church, 5/28/17

- (1) The Life You've Always Wanted, John Ortberg, Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997, page 102