

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost • October 1, 2017

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32 • Psalm 25:1-9 • Philippians 2:1-13 • Matthew 21:23-32

The other week, I went up to Christian Health Care Center to visit one of Advent's members. And when I got there, she was in a group of about twenty people or so and they were all singing together. And this woman, like many people her age, has some issues with memory loss. Remembering names and dates is often difficult. But here she was, no hymnal in sight, ready to plow into verse four of "How Great 'Thou Art." Eventually, I gestured to an aide that I was here to see a resident and so the aide went over and talked to her. And then the aide came back to me and said, "She doesn't want to talk right now. She wants to keep singing." Tough but fair.

When you talk to people with memory loss, it's striking how music stays with them. Because it plays such a large role in our lives. It's how we celebrate. It's how we grieve. It's how we learn. If you ever go to a church and you want to know what they believe, don't ask for a statement of beliefs. Just ask what they sang last week. That will tell you everything you need to know. So it makes sense that scripture includes songs. And every once in a while, besides the psalm, we'll get another piece of music. And today is one of those days.

The middle chunk of today's reading from Philippians comes from a hymn. It's what biblical scholars call the "Philippians Hymn." A very creative name. It's one of the oldest hymns in the New Testament. It was probably sung as a call and response when early Christians would gather for a baptism or the Eucharist. And it was so popular among early believers that when Paul was trying to get his point across to the church in Philippi, he figured that they would all know this song. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," it begins. "Who, though he was in the form of God... emptied himself."

There's a reason why those early churches sang this hymn. Not because it was catchy or because it had a good hook, but because it captures the heart of why Jesus is so important for us. That Jesus, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, had all the powers of God and yet chose to set those powers aside. Chose not to use those powers for his own benefit. Chose instead to "empty" himself. Choosing humilium.

The big Greek word for this "self-emptying" is *kenosis*. The idea, basically, is that in Jesus God chooses to become like us. Chooses to become a real flesh and blood person. Which isn't without risk. Jesus chooses to be open to relationship, which means he can be hurt. Chooses to be open to the future, which means he can be disappointed. And chooses to live like us, which means he has to face death. In Jesus, God becomes vulnerable. Becomes capable of experiencing suffering and death, even, Paul adds, death on a cross.

And not only that. Not only does Jesus give up his power, he doesn't even try to get power. This isn't one of our many myths about the self-made man who rose from nothing to have everything. Jesus spends his time not by cozying up to people with influence, not political leaders, not generals, not religious authorities, but by breaking bread with tax-collectors and prostitutes, people who don't have anything to offer him. People with no power at all. Instead of worrying about his own image or status or what other people think of him, Jesus is spending his time with the people who have the greatest need. The stories of the gospel are stories of Jesus's selflessness, Jesus's humility.

That's why Paul encourages the Philippians and all of us to have the "same mind that was in Christ Jesus." That same attitude of humility. That same mindset of selflessness. Athanasius, who was an Egyptian bishop in the fourth century, put it this way: "God became like us so that we might become like God." That God became vulnerable, capable of being wronged, being hurt, so that we

777 Wyckoff Avenue Wyckoff, NJ 07481
adventlutheranwyckoff.org • (201) 891-1031

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could become like God. So that we would be able to forgive, love, and relate to others the way God intends. Jesus set aside his power so that we could embody Jesus's humility.

Now, humility often gets a bad rap. When we hear of humility, we think of people who can't take a compliment. Or people with super low self-esteem. Humility often feels like something people in power tell people without power to practice. Like Paul is saying you should expect less out of life and less out of yourself. That's not the humility Paul is talking about. The humility Paul is talking about is about how we relate to other people. Our ability to give ourselves to other people.

This is a very different kind of giving than we normally talk about. Because we talk a lot about giving money. There's a hurricane in Puerto Rico or an earthquake in Mexico, and so we write a check or get out a credit card. Or we talk about giving time. There are things that need to get done, so we give our time organizing, cleaning up, planning, etc. That kind of giving is important, but it's also the kind that comes easiest to us. Because we can swing a few bucks or a few hours and get on with the rest of our day.

But giving of ourselves is a little trickier. What does it mean to give of yourself? It could be a whole bunch of things. It could mean offering forgiveness. It could mean grieving with people. It could mean celebrating with people. But at its core, giving of ourselves means being open to having our understanding of ourselves changed by other people. That's what humility is all about. It means being open to saying that we were wrong or that our minds have changed or that the world is different than we thought it was. That humility is sharing in Christ's vulnerability. Not just giving *to* other people or doing favors *for* other people, but living *with* other people. It's very hard to be giving of yourself and just get on with the rest of your day. Giving of yourself changes everything.

Humility probably feels a little pedestrian to us, but for Paul it was radically counter-cultural. Because Paul is living and writing in a culture that is hyper-conscious of status. Who is up, who is down, who is in and out. Who you spent your time with, what kind of people you associated with, mattered. To associate with people considered "beneath" you was to risk being ostracized, losing what status you have. For Paul, humility means giving of yourself across social boundaries without regard for what that means for your own status. Paying attention to someone else's need for dignity instead of your own desire for influence.

In the first chapter of Philippians, Paul talks about the problem that has taken over the church in Philippi. And the heart of the matter was that some people were, as Paul put it, "proclaim[ing] Christ out of selfish ambition." So instead of being united in mission, the church has been wrecked by "envy and rivalry." Unchecked ambition was tearing the church apart. Some people were trying to get more status, more power in the church. And it's very hard to be a church that's in mission, that's forming disciples, that's reaching out to people in need unless you can put aside your own desire for status.

We often think of humility as having a poor sense of self, but here's the irony, you can't practice humility unless you have a good sense of self. Unless you know who you are, you can't really practice humility. You can't be truly giving of yourself to others because you don't have much of a self to give. Because unless you're confident in your own identity, unless your identity is formed by something other than status markers or your own desire for acceptance, you'll always be worrying about preserving your own ideas about yourself, your own self image. Instead of being concerned with other people's needs, you'll be worrying about your own status.

Paul invites us to have the mind of Christ, who didn't see his status or power or influence as something to be exploited. The word for "exploited" can also be translated as "grasped," which might be a little more useful for us. Because most of us don't really exploit power, but we grasp it like crazy. We view life like an endless series of challenges to measure our worth by. We meet people

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at a party and what's the first question we ask? "What do you do?" And unless they say something that could be useful to us, say, an executive at that firm we've been eyeing or admissions counselor at Princeton, our eyes are already wandering the room. Or people ask us how we're doing and we say, "Busy. So busy." And, to be fair, we are busy. I've seen your schedules, I know what's up. But as tired and burned out as we are, a little part of us loves saying that we're busy. That we're the kind of people who are busy. In demand. Getting ahead. Hustling.

Paul says that the life Jesus gives us is something different. That Jesus did not regard life as something to be grasped, to be held onto with white knuckles. Jesus was so sure of God's power in his life that he was able to let it go. That he was able to live open-handed, seeing life not as something to be hoarded or achieved or taken but received.

That's why it's so important that, as Christians, our identity doesn't come from us. We don't construct our own identities. Our identity isn't something we achieve, it's something we're given. We get the mind of Christ by participating in Christ. Last week in our Wednesday night study, we talked about Luther's language for this participation. What he called "the exchange." That in baptism, everything that is Christ's becomes yours and everything that is yours becomes Christ's. In baptism, God gives you a new identity. That's why our liturgy says that we "put on Christ" in baptism. Because safe in Christ's identity, we can truly give of ourselves to others. Who you are isn't what other people say. It isn't even what you say about yourself. It's what God says about you. That you are loved, forgiven, and valuable in God's sight. And there's nothing you can do to change that.

Paul encourages the church in Philippi and all of us to have the same mindset as Christ, the same humility. To see life as a gift, something to be received. To live life open-handed, the way we gather around this table every week. Ready to receive the new life that God is promising us. Thanks be to God, that even when we can no longer take, we can still receive.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor