

First Presbyterian Church
Philippians 2:1-13, “The Way of Christ”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 9/27/2020

Do any of you know a perfect person?

Somebody who just always does the right thing,
always has everything together?

Sure, we know they aren't *really* perfect,
but it might seem like they're perfect.

We've got names for perfect people... Goodie-two-shoes
is one name that kids sometimes use.

I'm sure I used that when I was a kid,
although I have to admit I have no idea what it means—
“Goodie two-shoes.” The person is soooo good,
I mean they wear...*two* shoes.

Does that make the rest of us... “dirty one shoes”?

Usually, this kind of a label doesn't really have to do with the fact
that they do good things—we like people who do good things.

It has more to do with the fact that they use their status
to evade the hard things in life.

They tattle on other people, they become the favorite student...
it's the sense that

“here's a person who doesn't have to go through life
like the rest of us.”

We have a hard time being around people who couldn't possibly
relate with our life, and who apparently don't *want*
to relate with our life.

With that in mind, let's think about what kind of person we think God is.

At a gut level, when you're in the middle of a great day or a bad day,
or an average day, what do you think God is like?

God is perfect. God has done no wrong,
and cannot be in the presence of sin. God is omnipresent,
which is to say, bigger than we can imagine.

Though he is everywhere at once, God is at the same time, unseen.
God is all powerful and all knowing, and therefore impervious—
we cannot damage him.

God is all knowing, and sees our hearts and our minds
more clearly than you see my face on your computer screen.
God is full of glory and majesty;
on the throne in heaven surrounded by angels
who worship him at all times.

God makes the plans, God is in charge, God sets the agenda,
God is King—the ruler of everyone and everything.

Is that what God is like for you?
If so...can God really be someone who relates to your struggles?

Each of these characteristics of God
are attested to in very clear terms in the Bible, and yet,
if this is all that God is for you...
you don't worship the Triune God.

Huge, invisible, impervious, perfect, majestic, in control...
that is not the fullness of God's character
as revealed in the Old and New Testaments.

If that's our God, then we only worship a portion of who God is.

This passage we have before us from Philippians
rejects the false teaching that God is out “there”
and doesn’t have anything to do with you “right here.”
For us omni-God worshippers,
it’s a startling splash in the face with cold water:
the true God is a God who suffers...and is well acquainted
with the indignity and particularity of life on earth.

And this understanding of God matters for how we treat one another.
Paul says in v. 5, “*In your relationships with one another,*
have the same attitude of mind that Christ Jesus had.”

The attitude of Christ Jesus is on display in what follows.
Many believe verses 6-11 to be an ancient statement of faith,
a Christ Hymn from the early church.

It begins in v. 6 with the pre-existent Christ,
who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God
something to be grasped, or more to the point,
“something to be used for his own advantage.”

This theological poem-story begins by declaring that Jesus existed
as God *prior to* his incarnation.

Through the incarnation, which simply means taking on a physical body,
Jesus demonstrates that his equality with God
wasn’t something he would use to benefit himself.
Instead, he would use it for the advantage of others—
taking the form of a slave.

As a slave, he lives a life of obedience. We shouldn't get too hung up
on precisely what it means to be a slave.

It's not that Jesus took on a human nature,
and therefore was awful to look at, or was miserable.

The emphasis is that as a human being he lives *in submission*
to the One whom he serves.

The one thing all slaves hold in common is their obedience to a master.

And Jesus was obedient at every point—
even in the manner of his death—death on a Roman cross.

We commonly talk about the cross of Christ in church discussions.

But we often forget that the cross was a Roman cross,
and that it held a particular kind of meaning in the ancient world.

Rome was *the* global superpower,
and crucifixion was the Roman way of humiliating
and shaming its enemies,
and demonstrating its supremacy.

So Jesus, who was in the form of God, empties himself...
empties himself.

This is to say, by taking on flesh, Jesus voluntarily relinquished
the experience of being God.

He therefore knew hunger, knew loneliness,
knew the grief of losing his friends to tragic death,
knew real temptation – Jesus knew life
just as we know it.

And he knew real death – even death that emphasizes
the power of an Empire that calls upon its citizens
to declare that Caesar is Lord.

This is where irony enters the poetic story that Paul tells.

The irony is that Rome thought this death was humiliating Jesus
and declaring Rome's own power, when in reality,
Jesus' whole life was an exercise
in self-emptying humiliation.

You can't humiliate a person who is eternally God
and yet freely chooses to take the form of a slave—
this person has already done that to their own self!
Not only that, but in his obedient life and obedient death,
Jesus destroys the foundation for the power of Rome
and every other Empire, big or small, that has ever existed.

The final element of this Christ Hymn is that God exalts Jesus
to the highest place so that all of creation
can see Jesus for who he really is.

He doesn't do this as a reward, okay?
God the Father isn't saying,
“Well done, Jesus, you were a very good boy,
now I'll give you what you've been waiting for—
you've earned it!”

No, that would make the cross into a crude transaction
by which Christ attains glory for himself.
Instead what we have here is God demonstrating
his character as one who vindicates
those who have been treated unjustly.

Jesus suffered an unjust death, and God vindicated him...
as a result, revealing to all of creation who Jesus *really is*.

And just to stick it to the Roman Empire one last time,
at the end of time people won't be declaring that Caesar is lord,
they will say that Jesus is Lord.

In short, Yahweh, the God of Israel,
came among us and lived a life of submissive obedience
in the countryside, in the city,
in the midst of this same earth we live in today,
so that we could be free.

God isn't way out there. God isn't out of touch.
God is seen most clearly in Jesus, who didn't use his divinity
to escape the hardships of normal life.

In all of this Paul is saying,
"Because you are united with Jesus,
because you share in the empowering Holy Spirit,
because you are comforted by God's love,
Have *that* attitude in your relationships with one another."

The best way to do that, in my mind, is to take time
really looking around at people near to you in life –
the ones that look like you, the ones that don't,
the ones that share your line of work, and those who don't,
the ones who see the world the way you do,
and the ones who don't,
families who are organized like yours is,
and families that aren't.

Look around and take stock, without giving into the impulse
to try and fix everything about them you see is wrong.

And then ask God to empty you of your sense of supremacy over them.

Ask God to give you a heart of love for them
and a desire for their safety and wellbeing,
for their flourishing in life.

Friends, there are news stories circulating that are disturbing.

Much what we take for granted
may well be shaken over the next few months.

But while the shaking and shouting is going on,
the church of Jesus Christ has a job to do:

We need to keep a clear idea of just what God is like—
not untouchable and distant, not relishing in power
but nearby, humble, and unafraid of humiliation.

And we need to take steps of love and care for one another.

The name calling and belittling has to stop.

There are dangerous games afoot,
and powerful people seek to capitalize through them.

But these two things – 1) recognizing that Jesus shows God
to be in very nature a servant not an authoritarian overlord,
and 2) taking the attitude of Christ Jesus toward others—
they can subvert and disable the plans of the powerful
to turn neighbor against neighbor.

God is no goodie-two-shoes, but one and the same with Jesus,
who got down with us in the muck. That same Jesus is with us now.