

SERMON: Emptied, Humbled, Obedient
TEXT: Philippians 2:1-13

9-27-20

As the high school youth group gathered that Sunday evening at the church, they noticed a stranger in the room. It was fairly obvious to most of them that the young man - I'll call him George - felt very awkward in such gatherings. Very quickly it became clear to the others that George was mentally challenged, emotionally and socially delayed. He looked like a teenager, but his words and behaviors were that of a much younger child. He didn't fit in. While the other youth were not cruel to him, they also did little to welcome him or include him.

Undaunted, the pastor who led the group forged ahead with the activity he had planned for them. They were to act out the story of the Good Samaritan. After they read the passage together, the pastor began to assign parts. One boy would be the traveler who was robbed and beaten; three others would be the robbers; then there was the priest; followed by the Levite; followed by the Samaritan. George was chosen to play the part of the Levite.

All he had to do was follow the priest who went down the imaginary road before him, and walk on by the wounded boy lying on the floor. These instructions were carefully explained to George, and he nodded that he understood.

The skit began. And right on cue, he began to walk across the floor. But just as he was passing by, the wounded boy, playing his part well, groaned in pain. George stopped at the sound, and began to approach him. But the rest of the group, trying to control their impatience, reminded him, “No, don’t stop. You’re the Levite; you’re supposed to keep walking. It’s okay. He’s not really in pain; he’s just pretending.”

They started over, from the top. When it was George’s turn, he seemed more confident as he began to walk across the room. But once again, the boy on the floor groaned just as George was passing by. And once again, George stopped and knelt down to help him.

The pastor describes how in this moment a powerful transformation took place in all of them. No one stopped him this time. They all became silent with the realization that George had inadvertently become the teacher, as he demonstrated the lesson of the parable. Through his misunderstanding, he understood better than anyone.

I almost want to stop here, as this story is a sermon in itself.

This teenage boy, who was regarded as mentally half-empty, was full of irrepressible compassion. This young man, who was judged unable to ever reach full manhood, demonstrated a maturity and humility that might never be reached by many men. This adolescent, who failed to follow the simplest instructions showed effortless obedience to the highest commandments of God.

You know, there really is such a thing as being too smart for your own good. My mom used to caution us kids against getting “too big for our britches.” If you’re familiar with this phrase you know that it has nothing to do with gaining weight. What it actually refers to is arrogance, cockiness, thinking of oneself more highly than one ought to think.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, said it like this: “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.”

C.S. Lewis said, “Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.”

Humility is not weakness. It is not allowing yourself to be used or abused so that another person can avoid responsibility or feel powerful or superior. It is not our self-deprecating humor, nor is it the “aw, shucks” kind of false modesty that refuses to accept a compliment. It is not the belief that “the end justifies the means.”

Humility is about recognizing that the opinions and viewpoints of others are valid and valuable. No matter how educated or wise or successful we are, we can always learn something by listening to others. Humility is the desire for a fair contest, regardless of whether I win or lose. Humility places the good of the community above what is good for the individual. Humility values teamwork ahead of being named the Most Valuable Player.

Paul was appealing to the Church at Philippi for community unity and individual humility. One commentary I read stated, “Although [Paul] repeated and rephrased [it] in a variety of ways, ultimately the call is to empty oneself for the greater good of the church body, to practice humility.”

Furthermore, it was interesting to read “how radical [humility] was in the first-century Mediterranean world. Lists of vices and virtues were standard fare,

not just in the church but in the larger culture, often nearly identical in nature. It was a given that love was superior to hate, harmony better than fighting. However, humility was seen as a weakness in the ancient world, whereas Paul listed it as a virtue.” (Mike Graves, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 4, p. 113)

Another Biblical scholar wrote this: “Paul’s aims are neither self-degradation nor the affirmation of power discrepancies, but to call out individualistic quests for societal status and honor as contrary to the spirit of Christ -- and potentially harmful to community.” (Troy Troftgruben, www.workingpreacher.org, October 1, 2017)

Let me repeat that. Individualistic quests for societal status and honor are **contrary to the spirit of Christ** and harmful to community.

Paul continues, “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 [servant], being born in human likeness.”

As I was writing this, something occurred to me; something obvious, but for a moment, felt like a revelation. For Christ - who was God in the flesh - to empty

himself was to become human. To be “born in human likeness.” Think about that. If you were the all-knowing, all-powerful, ruler of the universe, would you ever consider lowering yourself to become human? What could make you agree to be emptied of all your knowledge and power to become just another finite and fallible and vulnerable human being? What would make anyone choose a lowly and limited existence, prone to pain and struggle, hatred and betrayal, sickness and death, when you could be above all that?

Then Jesus lowered himself even more. “And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross.”

The idea that God would choose to come down here and get mixed up in our mess of humanity - eventually becoming a victim of our sin and brokenness - is astounding to me. So astounding, in fact, it is why I bend my knee and confess Jesus Christ as Lord.

“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.”

Finally, to “work out our own salvation” does not mean that we save ourselves. What it means is that we respond to the gift of salvation and we *live out* our own salvation by striving to have the mind and the spirit of Christ, willing to be EMPTIED, HUMBLLED, AND OBEDIENT.

George wanted to fit in with that youth group. He wanted to be accepted and well-liked. He wanted to do everything right in their eyes. But in the end, he did the right thing. It was a lesson they would never forget.

May we learn it as well... to the glory of God!

AMEN.