

Sunday 26A 2011

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

September 25, 2011

Philippians 2:1-13

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Today's reading from Philippians contains what most scholars call a "hymn" of the early church. Verses six through eleven in the second chapter of Philippians have a rhythm in the original ancient language that suggests it was a kind of poetry. A creed, perhaps. Something that was recited or chanted or sung:

*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 slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

Paul quotes this hymn or this poem without citation, as he does in many instances, because this was familiar to the readers of his letter. If I said, "*Through many dangers, toils, and snares,*" most of you would recognize that I'm referring to *Amazing Grace*.

What makes this so exciting is that we are able to glimpse something from the life of the church—whether it is a hymn or a creed or something similar— and so we get a glimpse of how Christians were worshiping and what they believed in the two decades between the crucifixion of Jesus and the career of Paul the Apostle.

In any event, this song— let's call it a song— is about the humility of Jesus. There are three things that he does, all of them a kind of humility. First of all, there's the Christmas message. He becomes human. He gives up the comforts of heaven, and the prestige of being God, and comes down to earth. That's the theme of Christmas.

While he's alive, he serves others. He shows patience with his amateur disciples. He forgives sinners. He tells the truth even when people violently oppose the truth. He washes feet. He rides a donkey, not a horse.

And then he dies, in obedience to a difficult plan, and his death is the worst kind of death, the

gruesome death reserved for the most dangerous criminals, death on a cross.

That's what the first half of this little song is about. He came down. The second half of this little song is that because of this humility, this selfless service, Jesus has been exalted by God. Jesus has been given the highest honor. Every one on earth and in heaven and in hell will honor and revere his name.

So God has ratified, God has drawn attention to, God has honored– NOT power, NOT intelligence, NOT popularity, NOT good looks, NOT money, NOT royal blood– God has honored humility. If you want to know my ways, God says, if you want to be a part of my kingdom, God says: *Look here. Look at the one who emptied himself.*

This passage from Philippians is read every year on Good Friday. Why is Good Friday– the day of Jesus' crucifixion– why is Good Friday called “good”? It's the paradox that we spoke of on September 11, exemplified in the prayer attributed to St. Francis: *It is in giving that we receive. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.* That mind– the mind of Good Friday, the mind of Christ Jesus– should be our mind, Paul says today.

If it's hard for you to understand that paradox, you're not alone. It's hard for the Church to live this way. At Dove of Peace, we have ten times the number of people in church on Easter as we do on Good Friday. In our music, the Church has a difficult time with paradox. We had a grand hymn this morning, “*All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name.*” I've been looking for an excuse to sing it. The words are British, but the tune is as American as Paul Revere. It's from 18th century Boston, from a self-taught musician who was a choir director and eventually a pastor. The tune is about the oldest American hymn tune that is still in regular use.

But clearly, the hymn is inspired by the second part of our little song from Philippians. The royal part of the song, the exaltation of Jesus. There is a vision in the psalms and in Revelation in which everyone ends up singing God's praises. The angels, the trees, the whales, everybody. Church musicians like to play with that theme, understandably. If you look at both our gathering hymn, “*All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name,*” and our sending song, “*O Savior, Precious Savior,*” they both move toward a conclusion in which all beings, earthly and heavenly, praise God. It's a powerful image, going back a thousand years before Jesus, that we will all be joined together in song.

But our hymn of the day– which is a new hymn, although not new to us at Dove of Peace– embraces the paradox that the ancient song in Philippians embraced. The paradox of the St. Francis prayer. Some of you know that I think the lady who wrote the words to this hymn– Delores Dufner– I think she is an amazing woman. I've never met her. She is Minnesotan. But not Lutheran. She's Roman Catholic. And she wrote the words to our hymn of the day.

Now the tune is British, our opening song had British words with American music. This is an American writer paired with British music. The music is regal, from Victorian England, and

stately. Worthy of a king. Worthy of a procession down the aisle at Westminster Abbey. But the words are placed in paradox with the royal tune. The words ask “O Christ What Can it Mean for Us?” Paul said we should have the mind of Jesus. Well, what does that mean? What does that look like?

Delores Dufner answers that. She writes:

The question is “What can it mean for us to claim Christ as our king?” My answer: It means that we may not wield power over others as the world does, letting might take precedence over right. The way of love is opposite to the way of power, and as followers of Jesus, we are called to take the way of love. Love show itself in other-centered service rather than in self-centeredness. The fact that we are wealthy and powerful as individuals, and as a nation, places on us a special responsibility to care for those who are poor and weak.

And isn't that exactly what Paul says to us today:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 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. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

Amen.