

A Neighborly Heart

Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any sympathy, complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other. Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus:

Though he was in the form of God,
he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.
But he emptied himself
by taking the form of a slave
and by becoming like human beings.
When he found himself in the form of a human,
he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.
Therefore, God highly honored him
and gave him a name above all names,
so that at the name of Jesus everyone
in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow
and every tongue confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Phil. 2:1-11 (C.E.B.)

For the Children:

Do you have a favorite song that you like to sing? What is your favorite song?

When we have a favorite song, we usually know all the words, don't we? Or if we don't know all the words we want to keep singing it until we do!

When you learn to read, it's strange because sometimes you'll see the words to a song, and you can't read them without singing them. I can't say "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so," without starting to sing.

"Yes, Jesus loves me,
Yes, Jesus loves me,
Yes, Jesus loves me,
The Bible tells me so."

In the scripture we'll be hearing today, a man named Paul wrote a letter to some of his friends. And in the middle of the letter, he sings a song! I don't know if it was his favorite song or not, but he tells us every word of the song.

I don't know if the people who first heard it knew the song or not, but if they did, I'm pretty sure they sang along as they read it.

We don't sing that song in church anymore, so we don't know it. But the song reminds us that Jesus loves us so much that he gave up everything he had so he could live with us.

I think that's pretty cool; and it's probably worth singing about!

Let's pray:

Dear Jesus, thank you for loving us. Thank you for music. Thank you for songs that tell us the story of your love. Amen.

For the Adults:

Last month I began talking about neighboring, the process of learning how to be a good neighbor. I talked about how to create a neighborhood map to use as a tool to keep track of what you've learned about your neighbors. And I invited you to explore ways to start conversations with those neighbors.

Today I want to remind you that it's important to do so with a sense of humility. This isn't about showing our neighbors that we are better than them. It isn't about convincing them to become Christian or Anabaptist. It's about caring for them because we are called to love our neighbors (Lk. 10:27). As the authors of *The Art of Neighboring* say it, "we don't love our neighbors to convert them; we love our neighbors because we are converted."¹

That is especially true in a society where some Christians go door-to-door with their church sales pitches. Their activities sometimes give the rest of us bad names, leaving an impression we might be working against without knowing it. The worst thing we can do is to sound like a telemarketer who has a spiel they use to close a sale.

Rather, we want to be genuinely interested in getting to know our neighbors simply because we want to love our neighbors.

That is not to say we cannot talk about our faith or our church. When the conversation leads to a question from a neighbor about our faith or our commitments, by all means be honest. But don't begin the conversation there, and don't start the neighboring process with that as your goal.

In our text for today, Paul suggests we take on the mind of Christ and learn how to live with humility (Phil. 2:5).

At first brush, that may seem relatively easy. In fact, many of us are proud of our humility. ☺ But the truth is we don't always think about the ways we tend to put ourselves first. Even when we offer to help lead worship, for example, we still maintain power and control over our own decision to help. We are still the primary person affected by our decisions. We are not true servants who do the bidding of the master – when and how the master decides. That would make the master the primary person affected. Instead, we remain in charge of our own actions.

Paul knows that about us. And he is suggesting that we can learn from the example of Christ's humility as we respond to God's grace.

As I told the children, there is little doubt that our text – at least verses 6 through 11 – is part of an ancient Christian hymn. Paul may have written the words himself, although I agree with those scholars who believe he simply quotes the hymn to people who are already familiar with the song.

This particular hymn expresses the core of the Christian story:

- Jesus denied his own Divinity to become human;

¹ Pathak & Runyon, p. 102

- as a human he submitted to death on a cross.
- In response, God raised him from the dead.

It's a song about Christmas and the Incarnation; it's also about Easter's resurrection. It tells the whole story in a brief, yet eloquent song. No wonder it was familiar to folks; and it's no wonder Paul couldn't resist quoting it.

Though he was in the form of God,
 [Jesus] did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.
 But he emptied himself
 by taking the form of a slave
 and by becoming like human beings.
 When he found himself in the form of a human,
 he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,
 even death on a cross.
 Therefore, God highly honored him
 and gave him a name above all names,
 so that at the name of Jesus everyone
 in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow
 and every tongue confess
 that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Phil. 2:6-11 (C.E.B.)

The fear I think any preacher has with such a powerful expression of the Gospel is that in saying too little about it we may end up making it sound trite and if we say too much about it we may end up taking away from its power.

But Paul introduced it with the idea that we are to have the same attitude that Jesus had (Phil 2:5). He neither said too much nor too little about the song itself. This song was simply quoted as an illustration of the attitude Paul believes the church is to emulate – both as individuals and as a community.²

It is an attitude that can be summed up in one word: humility (see Phil. 2:3-4).

Humility, in its simplest expression, is caring for and about others and allowing their needs and desires to take precedence over our own (Phil. 2:1-4). It's choosing to listen before we speak. It's allowing a visitor to sit in our pew on Sunday – without letting them know it was our seat. It's holding the door open on an elevator when others are trying to get in. It's helping your neighbor move a piece of furniture.

Unfortunately for most of us, humility does not come easily. We tend to put some people on pedestals; and we tend to look down on others. We tend to see some people as “more equal” than others, and we often put ourselves in that category.

In a short video clip called “Street Hawkers,” Steven Covey shares a remarkable story of humility and its profound impact on people.³ It's based on the true story of a major department store chain that moved into a shopping district in a South African city.

As soon as the store opened, street vendors who had once operated on the site returned and filled the sidewalks, blocking the entrances to the store. The store manager could have used his political clout and muscle

² Craddock, p. 36

³ From a DVD included in Steven Covey's book, *The 8th Habit* (Simon & Schuster, 2004). I also found it online at: <https://resources.franklincovey.com/the-8th-habit/street-hawkers>

to remove the vendors from the premises. The store manager could have addressed the issue by turning to the police for help. After all, these vendors were trespassing.

Instead, the manager took the posture of humility and spoke to the vendors, one by one. He asked what could be done that would make both of them happy. And in the end, the vendors were given covered shelter around the new store; in exchange they served as a sort of security force. They knew who the neighborhood thugs were and helped keep them away from the department store in exchange for an ideal location to sell their wares.

Humility proved to be much more effective than coercion.

The danger, the temptation, is to think that humility is the way to get ahead. People have been told, for instance, that to get ahead, you need to stop trying to get ahead and instead focus on the tasks at hand. More than once in my Navy career I was told not to worry about the next promotion, but to instead focus on being effective where I was and I would soon find myself being rewarded with a promotion.

That is *not* what Jesus did (Phil. 2:8). Nor is it what Paul is advocating.

If anyone had the right to claim a higher position in life, it was Jesus.

If anyone could legitimately look down on others, it was Jesus.

If anyone could claim the right to be first in line, it was Jesus.

But he chose the course of humility. He gave up what was rightfully his for the sake of others, for our sake.

Paul encourages us to have that same attitude (Phil. 2:5), to willingly give up what we might rightfully claim as our own for the sake of others.

It is that attitude I am suggesting we bring to the neighboring process. It's the attitude that sets down our agenda and our needs as we serve our neighbor.

Last week, I stopped in the middle of a project at our house to give my neighbor a ride. Her car was at the shop and she needed someone to take her to it. And the week before, Ronda and I went to another neighbor's house after an ambulance arrived. We knew the wife did not drive, so we took her to the hospital and sat with her while she waited for her husband in the Emergency Room.

Did we have other things we could be doing? Yes. But we chose to be good neighbors and set our agenda aside so we could focus on the needs of another.

That is what humility looks like; and it's exactly what Jesus did for us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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