

With Christ in our Eyes

Philippians 2:5-11

Sermon by Dan Schrock

March 24, 2013

Palm/Passion Sunday

⁵*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,*

⁶*who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,*

⁷*but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,*

⁸*he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

⁹*Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,*

¹⁰*so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

¹¹*and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

I

One day many years ago in Columbus, Ohio, I was down on my hands and knees in the entryway of our church building, installing ceramic tiles. I was dressed in old, tattered clothes. My hands and blue jeans were smeared with grey mortar.

Around mid-morning, Moises walked into the building. Moises was a Colombian man in his early 60s who had come to Ohio from Bogotá to do a master's degree in Yiddish at Ohio State University. Through a network of relationships, Moises and his wife had found their way to our congregation. They now attended worship regularly and were friends with many of us. In fact, Moises' wife, Alicia, sometimes took care of our sons, Peter and Nicholas. We had been in their home often, and they in ours. We knew each other well.

But when Moises walked into the church building that morning and saw me on my hands and knees, engaged in the messy job of laying ceramic tiles, astonishment crossed his face. “Dan,” he exclaimed, “what are you doing?”

“Good morning, Moises. I’m laying ceramic tiles,” I replied.

“But . . . but . . . you’re the pastor! Why are you doing that job?”

Now it was my turn to be astonished. In a flash I realized how this looked to Moises. In Colombia, it was considered dishonorable for pastors to do manual labor, especially manual labor that required you to be on your hands and knees. In Colombia, cement work was largely done by lower class day laborers who had very little education. It was considered beneath the dignity of honorable, cultured, well-educated gentlemen like Moises to do the kind of work I was doing that morning. Then too, when Moises and I saw each other in the church building, it was usually on a Sunday morning when I wore a suit and tie, French-cuffed shirt with cuff links, and wingtip dress shoes. It shocked him to see me wearing the clothes of a manual laborer.

For me, however, dressing and working as a manual laborer was nothing out of the ordinary. In the North American Mennonite sub-culture that I grew up in, manual labor was a normal part of everyday life. We all did it, even the well-educated ones. My own father, a well-cultured man who spoke impeccable English and had two masters degrees from Notre Dame, loved manual labor. I myself grew up on a dairy farm, digging fence posts holes and hauling manure. For me, laying ceramic tiles was not at all dishonorable. It was simply a job our congregation needed to have done; I knew how to do it; and so I volunteered to lay the tiles.

Once Moises and I perceived some of the cultural contrasts in play for us, we had a good conversation about how Colombians and North Americans interpret manual labor in different ways. For Colombians it was shameful; for North Americans it was honorable, or at least not dishonoring.

Since that incident I’ve often marveled at how willingly members of Mennonite congregations in North America do things that other people might consider slightly dishonorable. If you keep your eyes open, you’ll see it happening a lot. A congregational

chairperson who repairs tables. A charter member who crawls under the floors and fixes the plumbing. A person of financial means who gives generously but secretly, so that almost no one knows about it. White-collar workers who do blue-collar tasks. An elder who sits in the nursery and cares for infants. A person with ten years of higher education who mops the kitchen floor. The list goes on and on.

II

When Paul wrote his letter to the church in Philippi, this is the kind of action he hoped to encourage. Paul and his colleague, Timothy, wanted people in the Philippian congregation to do nothing from ambition or conceit, but to act in humility. He and Timothy wanted the Philippians to put the interests of others ahead of their own interests, to act in ways that served the greater good of the congregation (2:3). Some people who study these things believe that Paul and Timothy had a very specific situation in mind. In 4:2, the letter names Euodia and Syntyche, two women in the congregation who were apparently struggling against each other to see which of them could gain the most honor. Paul and Timothy seem to think this struggle for honor was tearing a hole in the fabric of congregational life. So it's possible they crafted this letter to help Euodia and Syntyche glimpse a more excellent, deeply Christ-centered way of acting. Instead of Euodia trying to grab more honor for herself, and Syntyche trying to do the same for herself, Paul and Timothy want them to honor each other in humility (cf. Rom. 12:10).

To illustrate their point, Paul and Timothy write about the life of Jesus in 2:6-11, our text for today. We can think of this as hymn that succinctly tells the story of Christ. This hymn doesn't say everything there is to know about Christ, though it does cover the main events. The hymn has three parts, corresponding to three major milestones in the life of Christ.

The first part is verse 6, which tells us about the life of Christ before he became human. Before coming to earth as Jesus of Nazareth, Christ was in the "form of God." That is, in every way he shared the character and mission of God. Christ and God were

united in the same purpose. Christ had the highest honor you could possibly imagine, because nothing is more honorable than sharing life with God.

The second part comes in verses 7-8. Here Christ emptied himself and becomes human. He decided not to cling to his divine privileges, but to open his hands and let those divine privileges go. A good way to think about this is that at the core, Christ was still divine. Even when he became human, he still retained the divine core. As you've likely realized from your own experience, some things are so core to our identity that we could never change them or let them go. They are so deep, so much a part of what makes us who we are, that we couldn't relinquish them if we tried. By analogy, that's true of Christ too. When he emptied himself and became human, he did not give up his divine *nature*. Instead he gave up his divine *privileges*. The difference between those two is huge. He emptied himself of divine privileges. He emptied himself of the divine right to stay above the fray of messy humanity. More to the point, he emptied himself of all the honor he had as a divine person.

He became fully human while retaining his divine core. In verses 7-8 this hymn takes a sharp and unexpected turn. It says Christ became a slave. Some of your English translations might say "servant" in verse 7, but that's a poor choice of words. The Greek means "slave." The hymn essentially says that to become a human being is to become a slave, that there is something slave-like about human existence. This would have made a lot of sense to people in the first century Roman empire, because so many of them actually were slaves, with real masters. Probably some members of the Philippian church were slaves.

The hymn suggests Christ did this willingly, perhaps even gladly. No one forced him to become human, to become like a slave. No one twisted his arm. He had options but he chose this option because of his great passion for humanity. He chose to humble himself. He chose to accept the shame of crucifixion. And oh, you have no idea how shameful that was. We tend to think crucifixion was about torture. Well, yes, certainly crucifixion was a torturous way to die. It was excruciatingly painful. But for the Romans, torture wasn't the main point. The main point of crucifying someone was to publicly

shame the person. Crucifixion completely stripped the person of all his or her honor. It was a status degradation ritual which left the person in total shame. This is what Christ voluntarily accepted—total and complete public humiliation.

The third and final part of the hymn comes in verses 9-11. Until now, Christ has taken the initiative. But now that he's dead, God steps into the picture for the first time. God decides to exalt Christ, to raise him from the dead and enthrone him as Lord of the universe. By the end of the hymn, Christ is once again in a place of highest honor. The movement in the hymn is from honor to shame to honor.

III

Paul and Timothy use the example of Christ to illustrate what congregations should look like. Christian congregations are places where we try to pattern our living after the pattern of Christ. This is not so much a matter of what we *believe* about Christ, but *how we behave* in response to Christ. In this part of scripture, how we behave is a lot more important than what we believe.

Of course our behavior is usually imperfect, right? Sometimes we still grasp for honor and status. Sometimes we fail to put the interests of others ahead of our own. That's why forgiveness is such an important tool in discipleship. Often we will get it wrong. Sometimes we will be like Euodia and Syntyche, vying each other for honor. What matters is not that we get it right every time, because many times we won't get it right. What matters more is that we keep the example of Jesus in our eyes, that we strive to let his mind be our mind. What matters is that over time, we act more like Christ, step by small step, so that our living gives glory to God.