



Yours in Christ Jesus

Philippians 2:5-11

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March 20, 2016 – Passion Sunday

In a few weeks the Snowbirds will be back doing their aerial acrobatics over the Comox Valley. Twice a day they zoom out, circling inland over us then back out over the straight in all sorts of daring formations. It's all very impressive. One wrong move and one or more fighter jets could crash. I can only speculate as to what kind of training goes into being able to fly like they do, but it's obvious that the key is unity—everyone committed to one thing and everyone doing his part. As part of that, they work together as a team. No one of them is out for his own glory. This or that manoeuvre might showcase this or that pilot, but even then the others are working as a team to support the whole.

In our Epistle this morning from Philippians St. Paul talks about a similar kind of unity in the Church. What he describes compared to the reality of life here on the ground sometimes seems as impossible as those Snowbird aerial acrobatics seem to us non-pilots who don't even know how to fly a plane.

In verses 2-4 of Chapter 2 he writes:

...complete my joy by being 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 count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

This is sort of the ecclesiastical equivalent of aerial stunt flying in formation. Paul was writing this from prison. What would have really made his joy complete was for him to be able to visit them, but since that wasn't possible, the next best thing was for him to get word that they were living together as the Church in love and unity—

all of them having the same mind. And that's the key. Stunt pilots manage to fly in formation because they're working together, focused on one thing, one goal, one manoeuvre at a time. Close to our own experience, we merge onto a busy streets and highways and manage to navigate the flow of traffic and get where we're going because all of us on the road are focused on one goal—at least so far as it comes to navigating that particular stretch of the road. It's when someone does his own thing, tries to cut in or speed past for his own advantage or when his mind wanders to something else that accidents happen.

In the Church we sometimes have our accidents. Toes are stepped on, whether accidentally or deliberately. People make uncharitable assumptions about others, take offense, and storm off. It's not always easy to *always* be servants to each other. Sometimes we let our selfishness or pride get the better of us and humility and forgiveness fall by the wayside.

Sometimes we lose our focus and as a result we all end up travelling off-course or missing opportunities to fulfil the mission Jesus has given us. But we should *want*, Paul says, to live in one accord in love, and the motivation for that is Jesus himself. Living together in love and unity as the Church isn't some option extra or some ideal state that only the best Christians ever achieve. This is basic. This is simple. This is the foundation on which the Church rests. If we don't get this right we won't get anything else right—which may be why the Church is often in such a sorry state and so bad in fulfilling our mission of being light to the world. No, this is basic. In verse 1 Paul writes:

If there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy...

He's saying: If Jesus the Messiah asks you or motivates you to do anything at all, if you've experienced the love of God in Jesus or the love of God in another

Christian, if you have any sense at all that the Holy Spirit is at work in you, if you feel any affection or any sympathy for Jesus and for the Good News—if you feel any of this at all—then do this. If you have any sense of being in Christ, having found your life in him, then live in love with your brothers and sisters and live the unity that Jesus gives you with them as his body.

And that's it: Jesus. He's at the centre of this. Unity comes as our minds come together, focusing on the same thing—in this case the same object, the same person. Jesus. We don't find our unity in our backgrounds or our social standing or our culture or likes and dislikes or even in our mission. We don't even find our unity in pursuing unity. Unity for the sake of unity may be one of our greatest failings today: Unity is what life in Jesus creates, but too often we turn that upside down and we make unity the object and sideline Jesus and that just leads to all sorts of wishy-washy-ness, because when you make unity itself the goal you always end up sacrificing truth. You might find unity, but it's not then true unity in Jesus. We need to put Jesus first. If we put him first, the unity comes naturally.

Unity is the result of Jesus in our lives and of the love that wells up in us in response to his love. We find unity as we get to know the story of God's faithfulness laid out in the Scriptures. We find unity as we see the story of God's faithfulness come to fulfilment in Jesus, in his humility, in his death, in his resurrection, and in his ascension. We find unity as Jesus now invites us to join in the story, not just in taking part in Israel's story and experiencing God's faithfulness to his promises, in forgiving our sins and filling us with his Spirit and making us his people, but we also find unity as Jesus incorporates us into his mission and makes us agents of the Good News and agents of his Kingdom. Jesus is at the centre of it and if we stay focused on him unity, again, comes naturally.

Setting aside conceit and selfish ambition and instead being humble and serving each other isn't an easy thing to do. But this is precisely why we need Jesus at the centre of things. Paul goes on in verses 5-11:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

“Have this mind among yourselves,” Paul says. And then he describes the humility of Jesus. What he describes here is the humility we see in the Gospel of the Liturgy of the Palms this morning—the story of Jesus arriving in Jerusalem as the King, but doing so in humility and riding on a donkey. What Paul describes here is the humility we see in the day's Gospel, the passion narrative. We see Jesus mocked and beaten. We see Jesus rejected by the people. They so despise Jesus that they'd rather have Pilate release Barabas, the violent revolutionary. And finally we see Jesus in humility, stumbling under the weight of his own cross and being led to be brutally crucified outside the city. This is Israel's King. In his rejection and suffering and his death Jesus shows us what it looks like to be the world's true Lord.

And in that we see just how different the values of the God's kingdom are from the values of the present age. When Paul wrote that Jesus is Lord and when the first Christians proclaimed in faith that Jesus is Lord, they were making an incredibly

subversive statement. It was *supposed* to be “Caesar is Lord”. It was the Emperor Augustus who had finally ended the long Roman civil war. It was Augustus who had brought peace and stability to the empire. It was Augustus who was declared to be son of the divine Julius Caesar whom people claimed they saw ascending into heaven in the comment that appeared shortly after his death. “Caesar is Lord” was the Roman pledge of allegiance.

But this had been and has always been the way of the world. The kings of Babylon and of Egypt forged their empires by brute force and declared themselves to be gods. When Europe became Christians emperors couldn't declare themselves be gods anymore, but that didn't matter—they just claimed divine right. It was the next best thing. And things haven't changed very much. As we watch the presidential debates in the US we still see candidates making claims of divine right, but whatever the case, people still look to their political leaders today much as the Romans looked to theirs. We praise strongmen who promise to make everything better, even if they have to do it through force. “Caesar is Lord” has always been the gospel, the good news, of the world and of the present age.

And this is why what Paul tells us, this is why that proclamation by the first Christians that Jesus is Lord, is so subversive and so world-changing. Jesus was vindicated in his resurrection. When Jesus rose from the dead he did so as proof that he truly is Israel's Messiah, that he truly is God's King, that he truly is Creation's Lord. Caesar, Herod, Alexander, Cyrus—all those great emperors honoured by the world—are pretenders. It's been our problem from the beginning. Adam wasn't satisfied. He had to be his own lord and so he swallowed the serpent's lie and ate the fruit and ever since humanity has been in this rebellious struggle to assert our sovereignty against the sovereignty of God. We've struggled ever since to become our own lords. But

in Jesus Creation's true Lord came into the world and in Jesus we see what true lordship looks like. Not like Caesar or Alexander—just the opposite.

In Mark 10 Jesus said to his disciples:

You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42-45)

Jesus turns everything upside down. And in the Epistle Paul expresses it in a song or a hymn. In most of your Bibles you probably see verses 6-11 formatted as poetry. The general consensus is that this was an early Christian hymn that Paul borrowed to make his point. These words are a statement of the core of our faith as Christians. They remind us that while we may have libraries full of theology books on all sorts of subjects, all of it comes back to Jesus at its centre and here Paul gives us the main, the key points of who Jesus is and what he's about.

And the key point this hymn makes has to do with the nature of true divinity. Jesus is God, for all eternity—infinity into the past and infinity into the future. He stands on equal footing with God, with his Father. He is the eternal Word. He was the agent of creation itself. God *spoke* and creation came into being. However that works—and I don't think that's something we can even begin to fathom—the Divine Word was the agent. And yet when his creation rebelled and when his creation condemned itself to death, God didn't wipe it away and start over. In his love for us he instead sought to redeem and to renew. And so the Divine Word, the agent of creation, became incarnate. The Divine Word took our flesh upon himself—he

became one of us—the agent of creation become also the agent of *re*-creation.

The hymn says that the Word did not count his divinity something to be grasped at, but instead emptied himself. Two things here. First, the Greek word there we read as “grasped” has the sense of exploitation. It wasn’t that the Word was grasping at something that didn’t really belong to him. It’s that eternal glory and honour are his by his very nature as God. In contrast think again of the kings and powerful men of the earth. Some are born to it and other earn it and some take it by force, but one of the most common themes of history is men grasping and exploiting positions of glory and honour for their own benefit. Jesus had this—and not just this, but something far greater—he had it by his very nature and he chose not to exploit it for his own benefit. Instead—and this is this the second point—he emptied himself, as the hymn says.

This does not mean that in the Incarnation the Word ceased to be divine or stopped being God. This is one of the oldest heresies we know. It’s at the core of a modern movement that’s caused a split amongst the churches of our own community. No. In the Incarnation the eternal and divine Word of God—the Second Person of the Holy Trinity and the agent of Creation—joined his divinity to our human flesh. Jesus of Nazareth is both fully God and fully human. The Incarnation wasn’t a temporary thing for Jesus. The Incarnation, this choice by the Divine Word to take on human flesh, is permanent and for all eternity. Jesus is forever one of us and one with us in our nature. We enjoy stories of kings who disguise themselves to go out amongst their people, but that sort of thing is always temporary. Jesus did it for all time. And in that we see not a failure of divinity, but the very nature of true divinity.

In the Incarnation and in the cross, God shows us his commitment to us and his love for us. In 2 Corinthians Paul says

that in Jesus God was reconciling the world to himself. So rather than exploit his divinity, rather than watch as we his creations consign ourselves to death, he became one of us in this amazing plan of *re*-creation and renewal. He humbled himself, becoming one of us. But there was more to it than simply joining our humanity to his divinity. As if that weren’t humbling enough, he also humbled himself in his rejection by the people he already knew to be rebels. He humbled himself as he was mocked, spit upon, beaten, and crucified. Brothers and Sisters, if you want to understand the nature of God, look to the cross, look to Jesus and see in him God giving himself in sacrificial love for rebellious sinners, for his enemies, for you and for me.

Jesus was despised and rejected. Even today he continues to be despised and rejected. People don’t want that kind of God, whether it’s because they can’t wrap their heads around a God who would do such a thing or because they simply refuse to acknowledge that another has sovereignty over them. But, the hymn says, because Jesus has humbled himself, because he has done these things, because he has reconciled creation to God, he is highly exalted. In his resurrection and in his ascension he was vindicated before the eyes of the world. And the hymn acknowledges that one day all of Creation will bow before him and acknowledge that Jesus truly is Lord and that in this the Father will be glorified.

That’s truly amazing when you think about it. God doesn’t need to be glorified. He has all glory and honour by right of his very nature. And yet in humility—and not humility for the sake of humility, but in a humility expressed for the sake of the love of his creation and his people—God finds the greatest glory of all. God is glorified through the cross, through the death of his Son, Jesus, because there at the cross we see his true nature—not an angry or sadistic God arbitrarily crushing his own Son, but in a God who loves us so much that he is willing to sacrifice his very self

so that we be can restored to his fellowship and friendship—so that we rebellious sinners, dead in our trespasses can be restored to life in the presence of our Creator; so that through Jesus we can reclaim our place as God’s sons and daughters.

Brothers and Sisters, *this* is the mind we are to have amongst ourselves. This is what brings unity as we live in humble love with each other and as we humbly serve the world around us. Again, true unity doesn’t happen for the sake of unity alone. True unity comes as we each live with Jesus as the centre of our life, as we set aside everything that is not Jesus and commit ourselves in trusting faith to follow the one who is honoured as Lord because of his humility, because of his sacrifice, because of his love for his enemies. How do we live less for self and more for others? How do we learn to be less prideful and more humble? How do we cultivate a life of service when most of the time we want to be served? How do we learn to forgive when we’d rather hold a grudge? We do it as we exercise our faith in Jesus, setting aside everything else and finding our life and our security and our being in him and him alone. We do it as we ponder and mediate on Jesus and on his life and ministry and especially on his sacrifice for us. This is the mind of Christ and it belongs to us, because we belong to Jesus.

Let us pray: Almighty and everliving God, in your tender love for mankind you sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ to take upon him our nature, and to suffer death upon the cross, giving us the example of his great humility: Mercifully grant that we may walk in the way of his suffering, and also share in his resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*