

Title: Joy In Humility
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Luke 22.24-27 Philippians 2.1-11
Series: The Way of Joy
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Before reading this lesson, it is useful to know that in the original biblical Greek, the clauses that begin with the word “if” in verse 1 are constructed in a way that lays the foundation for Paul to make a request of the Philippians in verse 2. At the end of each of the four-fold “if” clauses, we need to add the phrase “and there is”.....which is implied by the grammar construction of the Greek; and has the effect of immediately answering Paul’s “if” questions with a positive answer. Let us give this approach a try, and hopefully we will have a better understanding of Paul’s request to both the disciples in Philippi, and to we present-day disciples. (Craddock, p. 35)

Philippians 2:1-11 (NRSV)

2 If then there is any encouragement in Christ (and there is), any consolation from love (and there is), any sharing in the Spirit (and there is), any compassion and sympathy (and there is), ² (then) make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 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 love a good hymn sing, or praise song fest! There is just something about singing familiar words to familiar tunes, that makes faith come alive, that makes faith more understandable. When I sing, “Jesus Loves Me This I Know,” his love literally resonates within me. When I sing, “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee,” I get why praising God makes me so happy. When I sing, “Name Above All Names, Worthy of All Praise, My Heart Will Sing, How Great is our God,” I am reminded that God is the proper focus for my life. When I sing, “In the Bulb There is a Flower,” I comprehend death and resurrection more deeply and more completely.

Singing a hymn or praise song is always better than reading some dry old theological treatise, because music takes us to mental and spiritual places that words alone cannot. And so, I find it fascinating, that when Paul needs to raise a hard topic, a sensitive topic with the folks at the church in Philippi, he first throws out a little theology – “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,”.....but then, before he puts everyone to sleep with his theological monologue, Paul breaks into song. Paul offers the words to a hymn that scholars believe is one of the earliest hymns of the Christian Church, a hymn which Paul probably taught to the Philippians when he was living among them and teaching them about God’s love for the world in Jesus.

We all know how it is when we’re reading the lyrics of a familiar song or hymn. Before we get very far in our reading, the music to which the lyrics are set just pops into our head and suddenly like water bubbling up from a deep spring, the tune of the song or hymn rises up within us, and we find ourselves humming or singing the words before us and maybe we’re even tapping our feet, or moving to the beat because the music gives us deeper, clearer insight, which is just what Paul hopes will happen when he reminds the Philippians of the hymn they all know!

We continue today our Lenten journey with Jesus; traveling along with him as he makes his way to Jerusalem and all that awaits him there. We also continue our Lenten focus on Joy; the joy which Paul found in his life of following Jesus; the joy he wanted the members of the young church in Philippi to know; the joy Paul desires for us in our discipleship today. The aspect of Joy before us today is Joy in humility, for Paul understands the joy he sees in Jesus to rise from the deep humility which Jesus embraced and practiced.

The old hymn in today’s Philippians lessons says it this way:

“And being found in human form,
⁸ (Jesus) humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name.”

In a world that is constantly inviting and tempting disciples in directions that have nothing to do with God’s purposes and priorities, Paul uses the words of an early Christian hymn to encourage the church members in Philippi to remember who they are in Jesus...to remember how Jesus invites and expects them to live, which is with the mindset and orientation of Jesus – which is to live humbly.

For Paul, humility is not an idea; it’s a practice. Humility is not a thought, it’s an attitude. Humility is a way of engaging all others. Humility is a central Christian practice and attitude.” (Are, p.58) I believe it is easy for us a to misunderstand humility that to which Paul is calling disciples in Philippians, or maybe I need to say that I misunderstand the practice of humility that Paul lifts up. For I’ve always thought of humility in a particular way. That practicing humility is about not bragging; is about not thinking too highly of oneself; is about not seeing oneself as better than others; is about staying in the background, and trying hard not to shine more than others.

Tom Are, Presbyterian pastor and author, in his book, *Joy, Even On Your Worst Days*, lifts up the irony of such an approach to humility. Are points out that in trying to be humble by being quiet, and attempting to be invisible, one has to be thinking about self all the time--that humility as it is generally understood and practiced among us, requires intense self-focus in order to ensure selflessness and that when all we're doing is thinking about ourselves, we fail pretty spectacularly on the humility meter because true humility is always focused away from us, and toward others.

Are points out that the "humility demonstrated by Jesus is not the practice of considering oneself in some "less than" fashion, that Jesus does not call us to think less of ourselves. Actually, humility is not a way of thinking about ourselves at all. Humility is never a virtue we obtain head-on. Humility is the by-product that results from considering those around us in an honorable fashion," (as having dignity and importance.) "When we see others as valuable, when we see the beauty and the worth of our neighbors (and remember that for Jesus, everyone is a neighbor.....) then humility is the natural result." It is worth saying again: "Humility is not a condition we achieve head-on. Humility is the result of seeing the good, the valuable, even the beautiful in others.

Jesus came, because he saw and still sees the value, the worth, and the beauty in the creation God has made – including us. As people of faith, Are concludes, we are to look for the good in all." (p.59)

One of the challenges to faithfulness, that is as old as the church in Phillipi, and as contemporary as our church today is "the constant temptation to let ourselves be defined by the worst in us, and to let others be defined by the worst in them." It is so much easier to remember the ignorant and selfish and damaging things we all do from time to time. I can recall moments from throughout my life – even from as far back as childhood.....words I wish I had never spoken; actions that I am embarrassed to admit to; thoughts about others of which I am ashamed.....I can recall all these broken moments far better than I remember the times when I got it right.

Paul reminds us that faithful behavior is to look for the good in one another, and to remember the good in ourselves. This is the way of Jesus.....where the spirit of humility lives not by denying what is broken in us and others..... but by recognizing that the broken creature – that we – always remain loved by our Creator. Jesus does not ignore the reality that the world in which he chooses to dwell is a sinful mess..... It's just that our sin does not ultimately define us. No one of us is defined by the worst in us, but by the best in God." (p.61)

God's best, God's goodness being that which ultimately defines us, is where we find our spiritual homework for the week. In the week ahead, I want us all to take on some tough and difficult internal work, working in our own hearts and minds to let go of those words and self-beliefs that keep us defining ourselves by our worst days, our worst moments, our worst decisions. Instead let us work to define ourselves by the goodness of God that lies deep within us..... the goodness which God declared when we were created and let us work at lifting up this goodness from within ourselves and from within others, and, in so doing, to discover true humility, Jesus-like humility and, also to discover a deep will of joy for living faithfully in the high and low moments of life, and in all the in-between moments where we spend most of our time.

This kind of self-work is always a challenge, but as Paul reminds us through the words of the ancient hymn, joy is discovered in humility. May the week ahead be filled with joy for every one of us.

Amen!!!

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Tom Are, *Joy, Even On Your Worst Days*