

#44 10-11

## HUMBLE POWER

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalms 78:1-4, 12-16

Matthew 21:23-32

Philippians 2:1-13

1If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3Do 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, 6who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, 7but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, 8he 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, 10so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. 12Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; 13for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Little known fact about this scripture – did you know that it is from here that a well established spiritual and theological understanding came to be established? It is called Kenosis. In the New Testament, “the verb form *kenōō* occurs five times (Ro.4:14, 1Co.1:17, 9:15, 2Co.9:3, Phil.2:7). Of these five times it is Phil 2:7 [‘7but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave’] which is the starting point of Christian ideas of kenosis.” (Wikipedia)

Kenosis is Greek for emptying, as in the idea that one must empty oneself of one’s own will so that God’s will can come forth. Paul is saying here that Jesus – having all the power and glory of God – had that power only because he emptied himself of his human selfishness and lived out the true form of God. This idea that the true form of God is being humble and being accessible to others – being love for others, is a radical idea. The competitions in those days for Gods were that the one who was the most almighty, patriarchal, judge wins! And yet here we have Paul saying that the true power of God, as shown in Jesus’ life was love and a desire to serve others – and since God is love, not glory and power, the only way for us to be like God is to do the same – “3Do 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.”

Another bit of interesting information about this scripture text is that verses 6 through 11 are considered by most theologians as actually being the words to a well known Hymn that the Philippians would know well. It is an interesting poem because it is a mirror image – a juxtaposition.

The first 3 verses show Christ emptying himself – humbling himself – God found himself in human form and instead of flaunting it and using this power for himself – Jesus showed that the true nature of God was one of compassion for others, not self. Then the next three verses extol the glorification of this form of God – this form of human – that humility, compassion, service for others – this is the true power and glory forever! What an amazing song! What beautiful balance!

Another little bit of background about this scripture text that I wish to touch upon, is the fact that by inferring from what Paul is wishing for them, we can discover what was concerning him. David Bartlett points out a parallelism between verse 2 of our reading, “2make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” and later in Philippians, chapter 4 verse 2 when Paul is concerned about a specific division, “2I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.” “Apparently (Rev. Bartlett writes) what worries Paul about Euodia and Syntyche worries him about the whole congregation in Philippi.”

So our text is written by Paul to emphasize to the Philippians how vital it is that they are not divided – that they live and work together – and the only way to do that is to focus on compassion of others and empty oneself of one’s own ego needs. That this is how Jesus was and how we are all called to be – even to death on a cross – sacrificial love – and when we do this then we shall really know God! And humans knowing God is the one great reason why Jesus was at all.

The spiritual experience that Paul is making reference to is unique as well. He is saying that he is filled with joy because of this practice and they will be too! Joy seems to be one of the primary, unabashed, reasons to follow Christ. Because as altruism comes a greater joy than pure self.

Another result of this kenosis seems to be an odd sort of power. This is the power shown in Christ dying – total emptying – total sacrifice and yet it was his closeness to God as a result of this which brought him back. His resurrection – the power of love and sacrifice over even death – this is a power that Christians are called upon to unify them with the rest of humanity. Christ’s example of having the power to overcome even the greatest most final injustices of life – the fact of death – is what unites us at the table each Sunday. If we claim belief in Christ – then we claim belief in overcoming all of life’s obstacles through trust in God and not in ourselves.

And Paul emphasizes that it isn't just for the individuals – but the journey is one of unity. “If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” This he says to all of the Christians in Philippi and is one of the banners we as Disciples hold very high!

There is a tremendous power of healing in unity – of loving together. God works through us when we can find a way to be with each other in caring for our fellow creations on this earth.

I might as well warn you now that you just might be getting a lot of quotes in these next few months from the book I am leading a discussion over on Wednesday nights. The book is called “12 Steps to a Compassionate Life” by Karen Armstrong. Right now it is just Darlene Fairfax from next door and I – but we still get a lot out of it and hope that more will come in time. If anyone is interested but needs the time set up or back some, please let me know – we can be very accommodating!

In the preface of her book, Karen Armstrong sets the groundwork for the rest of the book. She writes, “One of the chief tasks of our time must surely be to build a global community in which all peoples can live together in mutual respect; yet religion, which should be making a major contribution, is seen as part of the problem. All faiths insist that compassion is the test of true spirituality and that it brings us into relation with the transcendence we call God, Brahman, Nirvana, or Dao. Each HAS formulated its own version of what is sometimes called the Golden Rule . . . Further, they all insist that you cannot confine your benevolence to your own group; you must have concern for everybody – even your enemies.”

She then lays out, in 12 steps, how we can become more compassionate. And isn't that exactly what Paul is asking the Philippians, and all Christians of all times to do? To be more compassionate! She makes the point that as early as 551 BCE, Confucius was teaching that those who spend time cultivating their compassion for others were actually becoming more mature human beings.

Let's think about that a moment.

It is a baby who knows little else than meeting its own needs – and struggling to communicate through its helplessness. It is the adult who sacrifices their own desires to meet that child's needs. And Babies need more than food and diapers changed – there have been proven psychological studies that even baby monkeys will go crazy if they don't get love and compassion.

Some of you may remember the controversial studies of Harry Harlow from the late 50's early 60's. To surmise from Wikipedia, “In Harlow's classic experiment, two groups of baby rhesus monkeys were removed from their mothers. In the first group, a terrycloth mother provided no food, while a wire mother did, in the form of an attached baby bottle containing milk. In the second group, a terrycloth mother provided food; the wire mother did not. It was found that the young monkeys clung to the terrycloth mother whether or not it provided them with food, and that the young monkeys chose the wire surrogate only when it provided food.”

A series of experiments were done with these various groups which caused a terrifying amount of emotional and behavioral problems with the baby monkeys. “Harlow's interpretation of this behavior, which is still widely accepted, was that a lack of contact comfort is psychologically stressful to the monkeys.

The importance of these findings is that they contradicted both the then common pedagogic advice of limiting or avoiding bodily contact in an attempt to avoid spoiling children and the insistence of the then dominant behaviorist school of psychology that emotions were negligible. Feeding was thought to be the most important factor in the formation of a mother-child bond. Harlow concluded, however, that nursing strengthened the mother-child bond because of the intimate body contact that it provided. He described his experiments as a study of love. He also believed that contact comfort could be provided by either mother or father. Though widely accepted now, this idea was revolutionary at the time.” End quote

We are, as a human race, beginning to realize how vital compassion and selflessness is – not only for others but for ourselves as well. When we realize, as Paul did, that we can reach far greater joy through emptying ourselves of our own desires and living to be compassionate to others, there is a joy that is indescribable! There is a joy of humanity and God all rolled into one. May we continue to realize this joy in our strivings to be Disciples of Christ in Hyattstown and beyond! Amen