

The Humble God
April 13th, 2014

Philippians 2:5-11
Palm Sunday A

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God is coming.

Imagine that for a moment. God is coming here. The infinite, all-powerful God who created this world and brought you to life. He's coming to visit. And not in a vengeful God kind of way, he's coming to help you. In fact, he's promised that when he gets here, he's going to help you, he's going to fix all your problems, and make everything better. So...what are you going to do when he comes into town? You going to be on the couch watching TV? Or are you going to run out to the streets looking your best to greet him? Are you going to maybe even try to have a proper welcome prepared for him? Parade, band, statue? All the best that you can muster for God. Of course you would. It's God.

But then the day comes and you've got everything ready, shirt pressed and neat and all the festivities prepared...and God rolls into town on a beat-up old ten-speed bike. He's wearing an old set of overalls and a flannel shirt. Despite the appearance you strike up the band. I mean, it's still God right? But...you kind of figured God could do better for himself than this. There's as much pomp and circumstance as you can muster but God doesn't really seem all that interested. Instead he rolls up his sleeves and asks what around here can he do to help.

It's a bit of an odd thought, and odd picture. But then again, so was Palm Sunday. He let the people praise him, but the appearance was a far cry from the praise he was getting. Just some wandering vagabonds led by a guy on a donkey. Didn't really look like the kind of thing you've lay down palm branches and shout praises for. The people knew who he was though and that he deserved those praises. And yet Jesus himself, even though he was worthy of the praise and adoration, he had a different perspective on his divine right to that glory and honor. And that's what Paul talks about in our reading today from Philippians: <read text: Philippians 2:5-11>.

Now, I'd like to zero in on the attitude of Christ here at the beginning of the passage. To paraphrase, Christ Jesus who is in very nature God himself, did not consider it necessary to grasp that godly right. He had every right to demand all glory and honor and authority right at that moment that he processed into Jerusalem and yet he did not find it necessary to do so. Instead of grabbing and holding his divine right, he became just a human being. From infinite God of power and glory...to mere human. And yet, we are told, he did not consider that beneath him. He took up all our frailties, whether it was being hungry or tired. And he almost completely submersed the Godly glory due him so that people wouldn't see it. So that on the outside he would appear just a man. God was willing to look and act like us in every way, only occasionally showing glimpses of his divinity through some select miracles.

We would think that if anyone were in a position to demand what was due them, it would be God. But our God does not think like we do. His wisdom is perfect, ours is broken. In his wisdom he knew what was necessary. Jesus, the God-man did not consider it beneath him to humble himself because the outcome, to him, was worth every moment of humility. And the humility did not stop with just looking and acting like us.

He stooped even lower. To a degree that, if we hadn't heard of it already, would be unthinkable on the surface. Christ became obedient to death. God. The infinite, eternal God by whose will all life exists and continues to go on, God allowed death near him. He did not consider even this beneath him when it was necessary. And not even a quiet, comfortable death with dignity. But instead one of the most humiliating and painful deaths that our kind has ever managed to come up with. Stripped naked and hoisted in the air for mockers and laughter. And yet he consented. And he did not complain. As we saw in Gethsemane, this was not something he was looking forward to, certainly. But that did not stop him from going when he was asked.

Still, this wasn't fun. And it's not like he gave up his heavenly glory because he needed something different to do with his time. There must have been a reason why he allowed himself to be humbled so far, so low. What on earth could make the God of creation willing to endure all this pain and humility?

It was love. But not the doe-eyed romantic kind of love that we think of when we hear the word sometimes. It was perfect and unfailing love for someone else. Everyone else really. It was a love that loved because it chose to. It was a love that cared first and foremost about the object of the love, not the giver. He did it for us. If he had not humbled himself, we would have to die eternally. Even though we were rebellious and ignorant, he did not want that to happen to us, and so he humbled himself for us. We were rescued from the sentence of our own making and set free by his death on the cross for our sins. You would think that no good could ever come of such a grisly execution. But God does not think like we do. Justice was satisfied. Mercy was satisfied. Because Jesus wanted to save you. And he was willing to do whatever it took to make it happen.

And now as best we can, we are called to “think differently” like God does. Look at how this passage starts where Paul writes, **“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus...”** (v5). What was that attitude of Christ? How is it we show that? To put it plainly, that means that you may be fully aware of all rights and privileges and honor due you, but you do not care one bit if you actually receive them, so long as others benefit from your humility. This is who we are called to be in Christ. To act like people wouldn’t expect. To not be selfish but selfless, just as Christ was, no matter the cost.

Of course, for us the road is a little bumpier than that. It’s not just a matter of knowing what Christ has made us and knowing what we’re supposed to do and then going off and doing it. Because we are each divided within. We have the new self, created in us by the Holy Spirit, the new self that lives by faith in God alone and is completely selfless. But we also have still the sinful nature, the dead nature we were born with. The one that doesn’t want to give up our glory and honor. The one that wants to think more highly of ourselves than we are. The one that doesn’t want to be humiliated in any way. The dark beast of pride that we all fight at every moment of every day.

It’s that selfish ego that got us into this mess in the first place, after all. It was Adam and Eve in the garden that thought they knew better than God that brought sin down on this world. It’s in ourselves as we think we know better than God when we twist his law to suit our own needs, when we think that we can get by without his help in this world and the next. It’s our failure of putting our pride in ourselves instead of trusting in God that got us in this mess that Jesus had to die to fix. But the difference between your humility and Jesus’ is; you don’t deserve honor and glory. You are not always right. You don’t always know what’s best for yourself or others. You can’t do everything yourself and most importantly you can’t save yourself. The selfishness and pride only brings death on us.

And so Christ died to set us free from that nature and gave us a new self. One created by the Holy Spirit through his chosen Means of Grace. The means by which God brings us to faith and strengthens our faith so we can be sure we will keep it until eternity. And we have constant and ready access to those means because they are the Gospel both in word and in sacrament. Through those means the new self is nourished and is able to overcome the old selfish nature.

Not that it’s just that easy, of course. It’s still a struggle to be as humble as our God was willing to be for the sake of others. Because others will incite the sinful nature within us. They’ll give us reasons to hate them, reasons to withhold our love and care. Reasons to think ourselves better than them simply because their sin is different than ours. And the new self, caught off guard because we weren’t being vigilant or because we let that self grow malnourished or for whatever reasons, steps aside and lets that selfishness have its way. And we think more highly of ourselves than we ought. Which, when you think about it, about the position we’re in by nature under God, is to think highly of ourselves at all. It is in our nature to grab for the glory we don’t deserve even when it comes at the expense of others. And at times, that dark nature within us wins out.

But that doesn’t mean hope is lost. It’s because the selfish nature had us that Christ went to the cross. And in him there is forgiveness for all of our failures. We don’t humble ourselves and show love to others because it earns us something, that would just be another kind of selfishness. We do it out of thanks for the forgiveness that Christ won for us. We do it because he showed us a better way to be and he made it possible for us.

And let’s not lose sight of that end result. Paul here describes what happened to Jesus after his willing humiliation. Because he was willing to undergo anything for the sake of those he loved and to obey the will of his Father in heaven, he was exalted in complete glory afterward. He was given the highest place, and the highest title and the highest honor above all else. The entire world was placed at his feet for him to rule and his position of authority so great and so high that everyone should bow and confess him as Lord, as they will on the final day.

And we too have a reward for being humbled. For giving up trust and hope in ourselves and keeping our confidence entirely in God, we have a heavenly reward. When each of us pass out of this life one by one we go on to an existence where we will be glorified. We will live as God’s children in his household, leaving behind that rat of a sinful nature and all the pain and terror it has ever caused us. And all because your God loved us enough to humble himself completely on your behalf.

So in the meantime, don’t think better of yourself than you ought. Don’t think more highly of yourself than you are. On your own, you really are nothing. Nevertheless, you are valuable to God because he has decided so. He was willing to humiliate himself to the lowest depths for your sake. Now it is our turn to show that same attitude in our lives. Let the selfless love that Christ showed you flow through you that you can show that same love now in your life, knowing where your true value is, not caring at all what you have to endure for the sake of God’s kingdom. Amen.