

Christ Presbyterian Church
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Philippians 2: The Mind of Christ
Philippians 2:5-11

Some of you may know that my family and I lived in Kenya in the early 90s. We were on a mission, and my husband flew in and out of Somalia. While we were living in Africa, we spent some time with other missionaries. One missionary told me a story I would just love to share with you. It is a story about a young woman, Wairimu, who lived in the Ngong hills of Kenya. She was very beautiful, and she stood tall and regal in her countenance. She married a young man from a neighboring village who was an honored warrior in that village so when she married into his family, she also was honored.

Not long after her marriage, she had a little baby boy who was just adorable, and her life was good. She enjoyed her friends. She enjoyed her status. She enjoyed being a mom and having a sweet son, but there was one thing that was wrong in her life. Actually, it was more of an embarrassment than anything. It was her mother. You see her mother was kind of bent over, and had one leg that didn't work very well that she would kind of drag behind her as she walked. Her face was deformed, and one of her eyes would just kind of weep all the time. Her mouth didn't work well so there was drooling, and she couldn't articulate words well and was difficult to understand. Also, one arm was kind of curled in. Wairimu's mom insisted on coming to visit her daughter and, of course, Wairimu, welcomed her. Whenever her mother came, she would press on Wairimu to please come to her village and bring her little son to visit.

Well, finally when the boy was about nine months old, Wairimu could no longer stall this off. Oh, and by the way, when her mom would come to her village, it was about a two- or three-hour walk, it would take her mom a whole day to get there. Finally Wairimu decided to go and visit her mom with her son. She got up early, wrapped up her son and got there before noon. She shared lunch with her mom, and then chai, which isn't, by the way, like our chai. It is more just like sweet tea with milk in it. After a couple of hours, she said, "Mom, I have to leave. I need to get back to my village before nightfall because of wild animals, leopards and various species, but her mother said, "I thought you would be here for several days," which was the custom when you visited. Wairimu said, "No, I have to go," and she wrapped up her child and headed toward the threshold of the hut. Just as she was about to leave, her mom said, "Wait. One more story. Let me tell you just one more story before you go," so Wairimu said, "Okay, Mom, one more story."

Her mother said, "This is a story about a woman just about your age, also very beautiful, with a baby the same age as yours, who doesn't live very far from here. One day this young mother was doing laundry while her husband was gone. Inside the hut she had three stones, and she would build a fire to warm up the water and then wash the clothes. After she finished the laundry, the baby was sleeping, and she gathered up all the freshly laundered clothes and

brought them out to the back of the hut and laid them on the bushes to dry. As she was doing this, all of a sudden she heard some yelling and saw some of the villagers pointing and yelling. She didn't know what was going on. Then she heard a rush, almost like the sound of a train going by and reeled around to see that her hut was on fire. The roof was made out of thatched material. She ran into the hut just as the roof caved in. All the townspeople had come and couldn't believe that she had gone in. Soon she stumbled out of the hut and fell down, hair on fire. They wrapped her with the wet clothes, but she lay dead still. They thought, "She's gone!" Then they heard a little cry. They lifted up this woman and rolled her over, and underneath her body was her little baby safe and sound.

Wairimu's mom looked at her daughter and said, "Wairimu, you are that baby. You are that child." Wairimu just looked at her mom. She touched her mother's eye and the side of her mouth and said, "Mom, I didn't know. I am so sorry." That is a story that illustrates the story of our God for us. It is a story of a mother's love, willing to sacrifice, willing to bear 49 scars of the whip, willing to bear holes and a spear hole in the side that we might be safe and sound.

I have a question for you. From that story, do you think that Wairimu honored her mother more now that she knew of the sacrifice that her mother made for her? And whom would you honor more in your heart of hearts, the beautiful, regal Wairimu who had status and grace or her deformed mother who had given almost everything for her daughter? My guess is, you would say her mother. That is what our passage today in Philippians speaks to. I'd like us to turn to Philippians. Since Holy Week, and Easter, and Commitment Class weekend took us away from Philippians for a while, before we read the Scripture passage, I would like to review where we are in this whole letter. Also I would like to tell you a little bit about the context and the social structure of Philippi because I think it really helps us understand the extent of Christ's sacrifice for us.

So here we are in chapter 2. Basically, what we have learned so far is that Paul is writing this from prison, right? He is chained to a Roman guard. He greets the church. You find out he just loves these guys in Philippi, this small church. He intercedes for them and gives them an update on how he is doing. Then he shifts. The focus now is on pastoral advice and encouragement to this small group of believers because they are facing some persecution. Apparently there are some issues, some stress going on, tension, inside their community. Here is the context of Philippi.

Philippi, you might remember, is in Macedonia, which is modern day Greece, so this area had a Grecian type of background. What happened was, it was decided to make Philippi a Roman colony. It was populated with veterans from the Roman Praetorian Guard and others who had fought in the Roman army. Basically, they decided it was going to be a little Rome. They took everything from Rome, and they transplanted it into Philippi, and that included the social structure of Rome which, if you can kind of remember, I know some of you probably still are in junior high school but just remember junior high school, the pecking order. You always knew who was on top and who was trying to be cool and who was below that. It was a very difficult life. Think about junior high school social structure on steroids, and you have got the Roman social structure.

At the top of this were the senators. There were 600 men in the senate. You may think that is a whole lot of people, but think about it. At this point in time we have the Roman Empire. There are 65 million people in this empire. One out of every four people in the world lived in the

Roman Empire. Six hundred were selected to be senators. Why? Money. Senators were wealthy. Oftentimes at this point, their grandfathers and their fathers had been senators as well. Underneath them, in keeping with the Kentucky Derby, were the equestrians. What mode of transportation were the equestrians into? Horses! Right. Initially, during the republic era of Roman life, they were required to donate like 600 horses to the cavalry. They were almost more like knights in Medieval times, if you can imagine, sort of the upper crust cavalry. Again, very wealthy, lineage, extremely well connected. Beneath them were the decurions. If you can imagine how big the empire was, they needed to have senators and different people in these different outposts, so these were the folks who were either in charge of a colony or a municipality or something like that.

These three top categories of Roman society were 2 percent of the people. Two percent. That's it. Very finely sifted flour here. Beneath them were the Roman citizens. One out of every 65 people was a Roman citizen. You know how every once in a while, they would find out Paul was a Roman citizen and all of a sudden all the governors were like, "Oh, no. We have to treat this guy differently." Basically, if you were a Roman citizen, you had certain privileges. No. 1: No taxes. Not bad, eh? No taxes, but they taxed everybody else. Due process of law. You had certain rights. You could vote and so on and so forth. One thing that was absolutely forbidden if you were a Roman citizen because it was so humiliating, so cruel, and such a horrific form of execution was crucifixion. If you were a Roman citizen, you would never be crucified. In fact, in polite society, you didn't even talk about crucifixion. So, polite people, here is your dirty word No. 1, crucifixion. You don't talk about the cross.

Beneath the Roman citizens were freed men. These were people who had been slaves whose masters had granted freedom. Sometimes that was formal and they could vote, but usually they were just free to go and do their best. This was kind of where most people in the Empire, if you were ruled by the Romans, like the Jews, would land. Then beneath that, who would be on the very bottom? The slaves. No rights. Masters could dispose of them at will, and they owed their masters obedience. That is a word that ancient writers never used except in relation to slaves. Dirty word No. 2: obedience. Plato said, "How can a man be happy if he is a slave to anybody at all?" Slaves were at the very bottom of the pecking order. By the way, if you were in a lower strata, let's say, you would not talk about obedience like about being obedient to a senator. It was more like a father-son relationship or patron type of relationship, so you honored them rather than obeyed them.

Okay, who is on the very tip-top of this triangle? The emperor! During this time there was the emperor cult. You may know that emperors were worshiped like gods. Nero was the emperor at this point. He had a huge statue in Rome and claimed that he was greater than Apollo. If you were a Roman citizen, one of the things you were required to say, actually, even if you weren't a citizen, was that Caesar was lord and savior. Does that have a familiar ring to it? Caesar is lord and savior. Christian martyrs like Polycarp were killed, burned at the stake, because they refused to say that Caesar was their lord and savior.

Then, if you don't think this was bad enough, within each little category, there was pecking order, so if you were in the senate, five different levels. You would curry favor, give money, take different posts just to work your way up to the top of the ladder. This was called the *cursus honorum*, the race for honors. Even slaves have levels but what I want you to think about here is that absolutely everything in this Philippian church's mind, how they viewed the world, how they

viewed what was honored and respectable was dictated by this whole system of honor, *cursus honorum*.

In daily life, for instance, if you went to a feast, a wedding reception, where we would arrange seating according to whom would probably like to talk to each other, who would get along at that table, that kind of thing, they would always have the most important person on the right and the second most important person on the left. Then depending on your status, you would be served a certain grade of wine, a certain cut of meat, a certain type of meal. Everything was stratified. If you went to the theater or the stadium, you had assigned seats. It was chiseled into the seat where you were supposed to sit. Guess who got the front row? The emperor and the senate. Guess where the slaves were if they were there at all? It didn't matter if you paid lots of money or anything, you were segregated. And by the way, if you were a freedman, it was illegal for you to try to get down in the first row. Clothing. This is nice. If you were a Roman citizen or above you got to wear a toga. So guys, nice skirts. You got to wear a toga. If you were an equestrian, your toga had thin purple lines. A senator, broad purple lines. The emperor, a purple toga. Things across the line were dictated, whom you were, how you acted, and how you were honored. Life in Philippi was a race for the honors. This is the exact opposite of being humble.

It did happen now and then that people lost their wealth. Sometimes they lost titles or offices but, believe me, going down the ladder was to be avoided at all costs. Never would anyone deliberately choose to go to a lower station in life. Humility was not a virtue. Humility was a tragedy. Okay, dirty word No. 3: humility. Aristotle and Plato never listed humility among the virtues. You know that book that came out a while back by William Bennett, *The Book of Virtues*? Guess what is not in there. Humility. Still, in our western mindset not much of a virtue.

So Paul is writing to a small group of people in Philippi. They met in homes. They declared Jesus was Lord not Caesar. Their gatherings included women and men, freed people and citizens, people of different statuses who were all raised on *cursus honorum*. Do you think there might have been some issues going on in that church? Okay, open up your Bibles, page 1,748. I want you to get out your pens so we get to mark up the pew Bibles. Isn't that fun? What were the dirty words? They were: *the cross, obedience, and humility*. If you see any of those, I'd like you to circle them as we go along. Scripture says:

³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. ⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

The Greek word there for *to his own advantage* is *harpagmous*. Some of you who have read this Scripture passage in other translations may have heard that it was not *something to be grasped*. It is a word that means he would not hold on to all of the glory, all of the honor, all of the privilege, all of the status that being God entailed,

⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant

Or that could be translated slave,

being made in human likeness.

He made Himself nothing. The verb there is *kenoun*. Sometimes this Scripture passage is called *The Kenosis Hymn*. It means to empty, to just allow all that power, all that glory, all that privilege, all that status to go. He was poured out. He became a *personas medicrobaus*. The ancient writers said that everybody below citizen was a *personas medicrobus*, a nobody. Can you imagine? A *personas medicrobus*. But that is what Jesus became.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a human being,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Any dirty words? Yes, *personas medicrobus* was not low enough. He humbled Himself even more. The most shameful, humiliating death which was not considered something that even a Roman citizen would ever endure, absolute bottom.

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Wait? Isn't Caesar lord? No, Jesus is Lord. This is a sweeping hymn. I just want to let you know, because of the lexical links, the rhythm, the parallelism in this Scripture, it is believed that this was the hymn that Paul was quoting. It was in their minds and tradition by the time that Paul wrote this down. It is really like a symphony in three movements, isn't it? It is Christ the preexistent God coming down in human form, and then, that is not low enough, becoming the lowest of the low for our sake. And then God lifts Him up, Highest Name in the entire universe, Name above all Names.

The trajectory is this. The way *up* is down. The way to be *truly rich* is to give it away. The way to *lead* is to serve. The way to be *infinitely happy* is to seek the happiness of others. The most glorious thing of all is to give your glory for others. Amazing! But you can see where that honor comes from. Well, how about us? You and me. Are you driven to outperform the next guy? How much of what you do is dictated by the need to get ahead, the need for recognition, for status or honor? Is life all about climbing the ladder, getting into the best school that you can get into, making the team, having the job at the firm, or working your way up the ladder at work? Paul calls this in verse 3 "selfish ambition or empty conceit" and, again, in the Greek *kenodoxia* is the word for empty conceit. What it means is empty glory. Those honors that we race after are empty. Empty glory.

Humility, friends, is not something that is for the faint of heart. Here is what it is not. It is not being a milquetoast person, a doormat that people can walk over. It is not looking at your toes when people are trying to talk to you. It is not self-denigration or self-hatred. It is not saying, "I know I'm better than that guy but I have to feel like I'm not." That is not what humility is. What it is is laying aside your time, wealth, beauty, power, status, whatever it is that you want to hold onto so badly, for the sake of others.

I want you to just think about your own life. Think in your life about whom it is who has deeply blessed you. You know that you would not be where you are right now if it weren't for that person in your life. Who is that person? Got it? Okay, now I'm going to ask you a few questions. Was this someone who elbowed by you to reach the top? Was it someone who made sure that you knew their title, their wealth, their athletic prowess, the degrees they had earned and where you stood in relation to all that? Or was this somebody who was willing to lay aside some of their own time, maybe some of their wealth, maybe some of their status or beauty for you, to serve you, to listen to you, to love you, maybe even die for you?

Wairimu's mom was deformed. She was poor. She was of no consequence. Wairimu was beautiful. She had honor and status and yet, we honor her mother, don't we? Christ became nothing for our sake and, therefore, He is honored. His Name is above every Name. He is the one before whom every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that He is Lord. In closing I would just like you to think about *harpagmous*, grasping. Whatever it is that you are holding onto for your own advantage. You can live for worldly honors, significance, wealth, titles, beauty, but it is ultimately empty or it is *kenoun*, empty. Open that fist and lay aside some of that in order to honor another. And here is the good news. It is hard. It goes against our grain. We don't want to be humble. We don't want to be obedient. We don't want to be crucified, but to the extent that you do this and honor others, you will truly be honored. The way up is down. James 4:10 says this.

¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

Let us pray.

Lord God, these are hard words because we, too, live in a culture where we are racing for honors and hold onto our worldly titles, our wealth, our status, and our significance. Dear God, only by Your grace can we let some of that go in order to love others. Help us, Jesus, to find our significance in You and to follow in Your footsteps. We praise You in the Name of Jesus. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.