

“Discover God at Work in You”

September 28, 2008

Scripture: Exodus 17:1-7; Philippians 2:1-13

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Paul's letter to the Philippians is far and away my favorite book in the Bible. Partly because it's short and to the point. I like economy of words, even though I don't practice it much. But mainly it's my favorite because it is so relevant to the challenges of living together in a community of faith. Paul understood how we are. And he refuses to reduce our squabbles and conflicts to mere personality clashes. For Paul discord in the community obscures the presence of Christ in the world.

So the stakes are very high when we indulge in arguments. Now I don't think he intends to say we must never disagree about anything. He disagreed about many things with his colleagues. In fact, Acts tells of a falling out between Paul and the leadership in Jerusalem that may have led to his never returning there again. The problem isn't so much *that* we disagree as *how* we disagree.

I suppose from Paul's position in prison, hearing about the bickering among the Philippians must have been frustrating. He wants them to see beyond their arguments and difficulties. He wants them to discover that there is more happening within them and through them than they realize, that God is at work in them to accomplish an alternative reality, a new creation.

So Paul encourages them to let go of their need for dominance over one another, "to regard others as better than yourselves." The kind of humility Paul is calling for doesn't come naturally to us. We seem to operate from a desire to stratify our relationships. We're often convinced that the only legitimate organization is one in which certain elites have power to shape and control the life of the whole. And when a community is under stress the desire for those dominant figures taking control becomes even stronger. We may have been seeing the effects of that this past week as Congress wrestles with the Administration over who will be given power to take control of the economy. There's very little humility being expressed in those deliberations. A lot of righteous pontificating, but not much humility.

But that's the way we are. Maybe that's what was happening among the Philippians. They may have been behaving like the Israelites who turned on Moses when the water was drying up. "Why did you do this to us? Why did you bring us out here to die?" Things are on the brink of falling apart completely out there in the desert. The children of Israel are fast losing sight of what God is seeking to work in them. They're in a crucible and they're being molded into a nation, but it's painful and they're nearly ready to give up.

Putting our trust in the work of God when we can't see the outcome, when we're fearful for our lives or our livelihoods, is possibly the greatest challenge we face as disciples of Christ. Now, we have countless examples of how others have done that from our ancient history in scripture and from our more recent history in the lives of men and women in our families, perhaps, or in the life of this congregation. But Paul wants us to look deeper even than those examples. Paul turns our attention to the very heart of our faith, to Christ himself.

In Christ we find the perfect model, and by perfect I mean the most complete model, of humility and trust. One who is in the form of God, and in the Greek the word means stamped with God's image, gives up that unique status to take on our form, human form. He empties himself of all

power and becomes a slave. That means taking on not just our form, Jesus doesn't merely look like us, but he takes on the burden of our whole existence even to the point of death. Now that statement, that affirmation, in Paul's letter was probably not his own creation. What he's done is to use an affirmation that is already familiar to the Philippians. It's possible they repeated those words themselves every time they gathered. But Paul does make a small, but immensely profound, insertion. At the sort of climax of this hymn to Christ, where the song rises with the words, "he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death..." at that point Paul inserts the words, "even death on a cross."

Jesus doesn't die just any death. He doesn't die of old age or of illness or even at the hands of a murderous fanatic. His death is on a cross; he is executed by the state. His death is society's judgment on him for his humility and trust.

This is the model Paul calls the Philippians to emulate. But I don't think we can fool ourselves into believing it doesn't apply to us. We are called to emulate Christ's model of humility and trust. We're called to empty ourselves of whatever aspirations we might hold for ourselves or for this church. We're called to empty ourselves of whatever power or influence or status we might enjoy individually and corporately. We're called to empty ourselves of relying solely on our own devices, our own ingenuity, our own resources to withstand the difficulties we face in our personal lives and as a congregation. We're called to let go of all of that and put our trust in God alone.

We put our trust in God because we cannot find the water we need on our own. I heard part of an interview on the radio just yesterday morning with a Hollywood screen writer who had lived a reckless life for years, I think he said he started smoking at 12 and drinking at 14, until he was diagnosed with throat cancer in 2001. He was treated and is in remission now, but for that to happen he had to give up all his reckless ways. He said there came a point when he just couldn't do it, he was going through withdrawal from the booze and probably from the nicotine, too; not to mention the pain and sickness that went along with the chemo he was receiving. He went for a walk on a hot day in August and ended up sitting on a curb weeping because he just couldn't do it. And he said he began to hear a voice within him saying, "God, help me." Over and over. And a sense of peace came over him that he couldn't really describe, but it sustained him. He still had cancer and everything that would go along with that, but to this day he hasn't allowed himself to let go of that connection he found. Through humility and trust he discovered that God is at work in him to make a new creation.

Some of you, I'm sure, may know of someone with a similar story. Some of you may have your own story like that to tell. And I suspect you've discovered through such an experience that God is at work in you. But what about this congregation? What about North Presbyterian Church? What's the new creation God is seeking to accomplish here?

That's what we have to work out "with fear and trembling," as Paul says. And it begins with discerning the mind of Christ and seeking to put our whole trust in God. I'm convinced that God is at work in us, in the life of this church. And even though we may not always agree with one another about where God is seeking to lead us, how we disagree as sisters and brothers in Christ, listening to our spirits and not our egos, will shape every facet of life in this church.

Now, none of us has any idea where this journey will take us. And that can be a little scary. But we can trust that God is with us at every step and will provide the water we need to sustain us along the way.

Amen