

Proper 21 2020
Rev. Adam T. Trambley
Philippians 2:1-13 ; Matthew 21:23-32
September 27, 2020, St. John's Sharon, Pandemic Worship Service

This morning's reading from the letter to the Philippians says, *in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.* The letter continues, advocating all of us having the same mind as Christ who did not cling to equality with God but became like us, even suffering death on a cross.

I don't think I have to say that these instructions go against many of our natural inclinations, as well as conventional wisdom and common sense. We are supposed to try to win, to get what we deserve, and to look out for number one. We are supposed to advance our own interests, whether those benefit us individually, increase our family's standard of living, or strengthen those institutions and groups we are a part of. Yet, these attitudes are not at the heart of Christianity.

Before continuing, it is important to note that Paul says, *in humility regard others as better than yourselves.* *In humility* means that we have a proper understanding of both ourselves and others as children of God who are of infinite value before our Father in heaven. We aren't meant to regard others as better because we view ourselves as worthless or of minimal value. We don't look to others with the resentment of those beaten down and stripped of dignity. We can treat others as more important than us because we know we are beloved by Jesus who regarded us better than himself to the point of dying for us. The actions of Jesus who was the Son of God and the firstborn of all creation offer us the capacity both to understand how incredibly cherished we are and still love others with a humility that regards them as better and their interests as more important.

Honestly, this stance is always difficult, and it gets more difficult when we are afraid. Jesus says that love casts out fear, and we know that if we are afraid we are not in a loving frame of mind. Much of what is going on around us, from pandemic viruses to economic upheavals to a reckoning regarding centuries of racism to our own illnesses and aging to loss of loved ones leaving this area, all add to a sense of insecurity. If we have not rooted ourselves in the security of Jesus Christ, that sense of insecurity almost inevitably leads to fear. We see the results of such fear all around us, especially in the spectacular ways that much of our world has begun proclaiming themselves as better than others, advancing their own interests regardless of the harm done to their brothers and sisters or to the common good, and brazenly building their private fortifications to protect themselves. Uncertain that they can count on God, they, unlike Jesus, decide to grasp for equality with God and exploit it however they can. This spiral of self-destruction has played itself out too many times throughout history, and we all trip on its temptation too easily.

The answer to this madness is not what makes us comfortable. The answer is to face death squarely in the face and decide we would rather bend our knee to the name of Jesus than live to the glory of ourselves or whatever forces promise us safety and security. The answer is to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father rather than to stuff Jesus into a glitzy corner shrine as a beautiful decorative piece while we maintain a death grip on the steering

wheel of our lives. The answer is to realize that we are strangers and aliens in this land and to live as ambassadors of Christ according to the way of the life in the Kingdom of God, recognizing that we have no other inheritance and that anything we build here is, at best, a temporary placeholder for the incomparable joy of being in the radiance of the resurrected Jesus. The answer is to read this incredible passage of Philippians over and over until it takes root into our souls and we cannot help but evaluate how we live and love based on the crucified Christ who took the form of a slave and suffered death on the cross for us.

This morning's gospel offers concrete challenges of how to live into this incredible, scary, life-giving humility. As Jesus confronts the chief priests and elders about John the Baptist and his own authority, he says that the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of Heaven before these religious leaders. The religious leaders are busy trying to secure their own interests. They are hedging political bets, making public statements to Jesus based on fear of the crowds and the advancement of their own caste.

When Jesus lifts up the tax collectors and prostitutes as examples, he is making a profound statement. People knew the issues with tax collectors and prostitutes in Jesus' day. They were stereotypes, but they also weren't entirely wrong. Tax collectors were agents of the empire that oppressed the local, struggling, working people. They were greedy. They used their position to extort money from others. They were collaborators with Rome. Prostitutes were those who undermined families and marriages. Many worked at pagan temples, offering their services for those who brought their money and offerings to idols. We might recognize economic and other pressures that could cause first century Jewish people to become tax collectors or prostitutes, and we might have sympathy for them. But no one would imagine them entering the Kingdom of God ahead of people who went to temple and tithed and seemed to do what was required by the divine law that Moses received on Mount Sinai. No one but Jesus would imagine that.

Jesus' words, paired with Paul's writing about him, are a strong challenge to us at this time. We are all increasingly divided and entrenched, politically, racially, socially, generationally, geographically, by the technology we use, and by the media we consume. We are told that many on the other side of these fault lines are threatening to us, dangerous to society, and hold ideas and values that would result in the destruction of all that we may hold dear. It would be highly idealistic and Pollyannaish to say that these messages are not true and we should just ignore them and get over things. But, just like many of the stereotypes in Jesus' day about tax collectors and prostitutes, some of them are true. Some people who differ from us do not care about the institutions and the places and the way of doing things that we hold dear. If some people were put in charge, their decisions could cause us to lose income or health care access or other important pieces of our well-being. Some ideas being bandied around do threaten our sense of identity. Some people who differ from us are, in fact, immature, ignorant, self-aggrandizing, greedy, incompetent, and have any number of other flaws that would seem to disbar them from any kind of leadership or even admission to polite society.

But scripture says this: *in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.*

In humility, we have to listen to them anyway. In humility, we have to find their humanity. In humility, we have to look at them with Jesus' eyes. In humility, we have to care about their well-being and pray that God blesses them abundantly and even look to their interests. In humility, we do all of this, even when there is a cost to us that we would rather not bear. In humility, we recognize that we cannot celebrate a victory that comes at the expense of others, even if those others have decided they are our enemies. In humility, we look at the gaping chasm between us and Jesus that he was willing to die in order to bridge, and we cannot help but step across the small cracks that separate us from the neighbors whose Facebook posts may be truly written in the agit-prop department of hell itself.

I am not advocating that we ignore the needy or allow the oppressed to be trampled or disregard our ethics and morality. Nor I am suggesting a passivity during this time when we need creativity and boldness and a fearlessness in recreating our increasingly disintegrating common life. But I am saying that we cannot treat others worse than Jesus treated us and claim to be his followers. I also claim that God is bigger than any of us, and we may need to be willing to let go of some of the things we hold most dear. I recognize that some of those necessary losses may be very painful. But I know I would not be here if I had not been willing to change and grow and give up things in many agonizing ways that I could not have imagined that God would want or even allow. Yet, in retrospect, I believe he led those very changes. And here I am.

If we go into every encounter with others – whether on social media, in the streets, over the dinner table, or in those unhelpful conversations that we have in our heads with people who anger us – if we go into every one of those encounters with love and humility instead of focusing on our own rightness and interests, we will transform the world. This transformation will not be what we expect. We might change our minds about something. We might find common ground in areas we least expected. We might change someone else's mind. We might lose and have to make peace with a new world and find ourselves deepening our reliance on Jesus in the midst of it. We might be crucified and raised with Christ. We will almost certainly deepen our capacity for love and build something new that remains. As Saint Paul says in another place, *three things remain: faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love*. Not our interests. Not our opinion of ourselves or our estimation of others. Love. Jesus showed that what is built on love, even love for our enemies, remains as a blessing, even if, as in his case, what ended up built on that love was first a cross.

In humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. Honest to God, that is the only way forward.