
Let the Same Mind – the Same Song – Be in You!

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Proper 21 – Year A

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

*who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.
--Philippians 2:5-11*

Some of us have sure been watching great things on television and computer in the last six months! And looking for great stories! And even trying to learn to sing or play an instrument! Well, the next time you're looking for a good story, or something to sing, try this old story from the Bible, the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 16.

That chapter tells a fascinating story about the apostle Paul. Through some strange vision, Paul was urged to travel through a land called Macedonia. As he travelled, like he usually did, he tried to establish a church, or at least a Christian community, wherever he ended up. Paul and his partner, Silas, ended up in a town called Philippi. Apparently, their custom was to hang out outside the city gate at the river, the local watering hole, you might say, the place for social talk and engagement, especially on the Sabbath when it was also a place for prayer.

Paul and Silas first sat down and spoke to some women there. One of the women was named Lydia, who was probably a well-to-do textile merchant. She was so moved by Paul's words that she was baptized, along with everyone else in her household. After that, Lydia invited the Christian missionaries to stay at her house.

Then, it looks as if an early Christian community, a "church," if you will, developed in Lydia's house. And I imagine that the community there engaged in familiar early church activities, such as prayer and, of course, singing. Lydia, a woman, was probably the head of the church in that community!

Well, during their stay in Philippi, Paul and Silas were thrown into prison, a frequent occurrence, actually, for Paul. The Apostle Paul knew what it was like to be imprisoned without cause. At midnight, however, an interesting thing was going on. According to the Book of Acts, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God...**singing hymns to God**. (Remember that!) The other prisoners were listening to them, when suddenly an earthquake occurred, such a great earthquake that the doors of the prison were jarred open, and all the prisoners' fetters and chains were cast off.

The Philippian jailer, apparently, was scared to death; but, just before he tried to kill himself, Paul comforted him and, in fact, ended up baptizing him—and not just the jailer, but the jailer's whole household as well.

That story has many other details which you're sure to like. The account fascinates me, however, in that one little phrase which I emphasized in my telling, the fact that, while bound in prison, Paul and Silas were **singing hymns to God**.

What were they singing? I suggest, it may just be, that one of the hymns they were singing was this passage we have read this morning from, what else but, the Epistle to the Philippians (the church in Philippi!).

This passage, Philippians 2:5-11, which we read earlier today, has intrigued New Testament scholars for some time. Only recently, in the past hundred years, has the notion been advanced that this passage, Philippians 2:5-11, is really an early Christian hymn. Maybe it started as an Aramaic psalm, maybe it was a Jewish-Gnostic hymn filled with Christian theology, maybe it was a Syrian hymn. The scholars debate among themselves.

Whatever. My point is that, as usual, modern scholars are way behind the artists! Because, before the scholars of the 20th century came to a consensus about this passage's hymn qualities, at least two poets and two more musicians had already put this passage to music for our church! We just sang (or heard sung) one of their efforts, hymn #435, "At the Name of Jesus." That hymn is a paraphrase of this powerful Philippians passage. The other paraphrase was written by the legendary Bland Tucker, hymn #477, "All praise to thee, for thou, O King divine, didst yield the glory that of right was thine."

Both these hymns seem to recognize implicitly that special quality of Philippians 2:5-11 which makes it singable, a combination of rich, tightly woven theology and smooth meter. When we sing that text, we are singing the very same sort of thing that Paul and Silas were singing in the Philippians jail! Years later, after the Philippian jail experience, Paul was again in prison in Rome. From that prison, he wrote today's letter of encouragement back to the Philippians, and he included this hymn. He may well have been remembering (maybe!) this same hymn that he had been singing in Philippi.

And it is a beautiful passage. "Though Christ was in the form of God," verse 6 says. That word, "form" (of God) is the same sort of word that the book of Genesis uses, when God says "Let us make humanity in our image." The same word that can be translated "image" in Genesis, is translated "form" in Philippians. This Jesus is showing us the image of God.

But, says this Philippian hymn at verse 6, Jesus "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped." Remember who else was made in the image of God? Remember Adam and Eve, who were given the condition, "if you eat of this tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will be like God." And what did they do but grab and take it. They grasped it, and exploited that image of God. As a result of that grabbing, Adam tarnished the image of God.

But Jesus, it says here in Philippians, Jesus reverses this! Jesus, unlike Adam, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but instead emptied himself. Jesus is thus the new humanity, characterized not by grabbing, but by self-emptying.

Instead of the upward grasp of Adam, the movement of Jesus is a downward emptying. So we learn through Jesus something important about the image of God. Our God is a self-emptying God.

Someone once said that "when God creates, it means that he allows something to exist which is not himself. This requires an act of profound renunciation." (Diogenes Allen, *The Traces of God*, p.34). Wow, ...an act of profound renunciation. Those of you who have had the courage to bring children into this world know what that is like. In love, you bring something, someone, into the world who is not you, not you! It is kind of letting go of yourself, a kind of renunciation. That is love.

Yes, we who follow in the tradition of the old Adam find this "profound renunciation" extremely difficult. We are

scared of being empty. We usually prefer to be a grasping people. We seize. We take. We even hold on to things that were never ours to hold on to. Yet here is Jesus who has a valid identity – he is in the form of God – here is Jesus giving up even that divine identity.

Philippians 2 says "Let the same mind [or attitude] be in you that was in Christ Jesus..." Let the same song be in you! A self-emptying attitude. For it is only when we allow ourselves to be emptied that we realize truth. It is when we give up what we think we are that we realize the truth about ourselves. Thomas Merton, the delightful Roman monk of our own time, realized this, after much searching and much solitude. "Who am I?" he asked, "Who am I? My deepest realization of who I am is that I am one loved by Christ."

Love. There can be no other reason for God emptying himself before us. There can be no other reason for God creating us, allowing something to exist which is not himself. There can be no other reason for this downward movement of God – not an upward movement, grabbing and grasping and straining for attention. The movement of God in Jesus Christ is downward – downward, toward us, downward, toward those in need, downward in love.

"Have the same love," says Paul to the Philippians. "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves."

When we empty ourselves, we discover what love is. In fact, emptiness may not be a despairing place at all. Emptiness may be exactly where God wants us. For it is often there, in our emptiness, in our renunciation, that we find two things. We find in our deepest realization, that we are loved by Christ; and we find, in our deepest realization, that we can sincerely love one another.

These are not easy things to find, nor is this downward movement of God easy to explain rationally. This is why some of the best theology comes to us in poetry! And why some of our deepest motivation comes in songs and hymns!

Yes, Paul and Silas, long ago, sang a hymn to God which broke chains of prison, which broke chains of bondage and of fear. Not afraid of being empty before God, they sang of a way of freedom. Nineteen hundred years later, we, too, sing songs of freedom – in our reading, in our prayer, in our action – that "At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess him king of glory now." Let the same song be in us.

In that proclamation is the great mystery of Christianity, that our Lord is not a demanding and conceited God, but a self-emptying and giving God. Our Lord, Jesus, does not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but instead empties himself and humbles himself. We now sing that self-emptying Christ as our Lord. And as we proclaim the downward movement of God, we follow that movement; we allow emptiness, we honor humility, and so we build up the glory of God.

AMEN.

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