

Dear Friends,

Welcome to our Hills Church on-line Bible Study. I'm delighted that you are a part of this. Each week the coming Sunday's preacher will e-mail you the text that he or she intends to base the sermon upon, along with some initial thoughts, historical information, theological background, questions, and the occasional link to an interesting article. I'm convinced that even though it looks like a monologue, if preaching is going to be good, it must be a dialogue. The aim of this Bible Study is to start the conversation.

One final piece of housekeeping: during most weeks, our Biblical readings will be based upon selections assigned from the Revised Common Lectionary. The RCL is a rotating selection of texts "assigned" to churches throughout the world. On a given Sunday, most Christian churches will hear the same text in worship. The RCL is divided into three-year cycles. Each year features one Gospel. In our current cycle, texts are assigned from the Gospel of Matthew. In addition to a Gospel text, the lectionary also assigns a Psalm, an Old Testament lesson, and a reading from one of the New Testament letters. This last reading is known as the "Epistle lesson."

We won't always stick with the lectionary. In good Congregationalist fashion, we're free to follow the assignments or not. I preach from the assigned texts about 70% of the time.

All right, on to the adventure! On Sunday, September 28th, the assigned Epistle lesson is Philippians 2:1-13. Philippians is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church in the city of Philippi. Paul founded this church in the year 52. He had to leave soon thereafter because of persecution from the city leaders. The church he left behind continued to struggle under this same oppression.

Many of Paul's letters reflect anger or frustration with the churches they are written to. Oftentimes, after Paul left a church, other more charismatic evangelists would follow, and their teaching would differ from his. This evoked great irritation and pain in the Apostle. This is not the case with the church in Philippi. The letter reflects the fact that Paul and the congregation remained great friends. It is a lovely piece of work, uplifting and encouraging, full of joy. This upbeat tone is made all the more remarkable by the fact that Paul wrote it while languishing in a Roman prison. Scholars estimate that the letter was written in the year 64, twelve years after Paul left Philippi. The consensus is that the purpose of the letter was twofold:

- 1) Paul wanted to thank the Philippians for their support. They have sent a friend named Epaphroditus with a gift of money. The congregation's intention is that Epaphroditus might stay with Paul to be his helper or servant.
- 2) Paul has heard, perhaps from Epaphroditus, that there is some dissension in the congregation, that after more than a decade of unity, folks in the church are starting to splinter.

Our passage addresses this second concern. These verses contain what is probably the oldest single piece of literature in the New Testament. Verses 6-11 are known as "The Christ Hymn." Scholarly consensus holds that they form a baptismal formula that might have been sung when new Christians were baptized. Paul is quoting familiar words to the Philippians. It is as if a former pastor of the Hills

Church wrote us a letter and quoted “Amazing Grace.”

Here is the reading:

Philippians 2:1-13

*If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, 6who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, 7but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, 8he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. 9Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, 10so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

*12Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; 13for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

Occasionally, modern Christians will argue that Paul took “the simple religion of Jesus” and turned it into a “complex religion about Jesus.” This argument assumes that Jesus came to teach a new system of ethics, exemplified by the Sermon on the Mount, and thought that we could better relate to God were we to simply change the way we live. Paul's critics then claim that Paul took this tradition and changed it, turning Jesus from a man who pointed us *toward* God into a man who *was* God.

The Christ Hymn challenges this criticism. Scholars believe that it dates back to the first decade after Christ died. And it very clearly states that the earliest Christians, many of whom were alive when Christ himself was alive, believed that he was indeed the incarnation of God. The Biblical scholar William Barclay explores verse 6 which reads “*though he was in the form of God; [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.*” Barclay explains that ancient Greek had two words which are read as “form” in English. “Morphe” referred to the unchangeable essence of something. “Schema” referred to its outer shape. For instance, a person's “morphe” remains constant throughout their life, while their “schema” changes. Or, to use Barclay's example, roses, daffodils and tulips all have the morphe of flower, but each has a different schema.

In the original Greek, verse 6 uses the word “morphe” for Jesus being in the “form” of God. That is to say, the passage claims his unchangeable essence is divine. We can agree or disagree about that claim, but it seems clear that this is what the first generation of Christians believed.

In verse 7, the hymn states that, though he was in the form of God, Christ “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.” The Greek word that translates as “emptied himself” is “kenoun.” It literally means “to

empty” and connotes removing things from a container, pouring every last drop out until the container is empty. Its usage in verse 7 means that Christ “emptied himself” or poured himself out, or, finally, gave himself away.

Here, I think, we arrive at the heart of the passage. Confronted with his beloved congregation on the verge of breaking into factions Paul encourages them to have “the mind of Christ” and then quotes this familiar hymn that reminds them that in Christ God emptied himself of his power and glory in order to be with us. A theologian named Susan Jones writes that with this move “Paul suggests that incorporation into the body of Christ [i.e., the Church] demands humility of the type demonstrated by Jesus.”

What might such self-emptying look like in our midst?

Can you think of examples from life at the Hills Church in which such humility has been modeled?

What do you make of the claim that Jesus “was in the form of God” but chose not to exploit this power?

What do you make of the distinction between the religion *of* Jesus and a religion *about* Jesus?

We'll explore some aspects of some of these questions on Sunday morning and I'll share some stories that I think illustrate vividly what Christ-like “self emptying” looks like in today's world.

God bless you. And thanks again for joining our Bible Study!

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