

A Proper 21
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Philippians 2.1-13 RCL

Humility, Incarnation, and *The Shack*

I've been reading an interesting and fun book lately, *The Shack*, by William P. Young. It is novelistic theology, or perhaps better put, an extended parable. Its protagonist is Mackenzie, a man who has suffered a tremendous emotional trauma which has left him angry with God. God invites Mackenzie to spend a weekend with the Trinity in a dilapidated shack in the wilderness. There Mackenzie learns to see God and God's creation from a different perspective than his usual one and in the process is healed of his emotional and spiritual wound. The book deals with most of the questions that Christians have asked down through the centuries: why does God allow evil, what is God like, how could God's infinity be held in the finite human life of Jesus Christ, how can we forgive, how can we accept forgiveness, what is the place of humility in a healthy human psyche, and much more. I found the book refreshing and altogether instructive. With only a couple of minor reservations, I heartily recommend it to you. I'm sure you will enjoy it and learn from it.

Let's reflect a bit on one of those questions, for it goes to the heart of the Christian challenge to trust God's activity in Jesus of Nazareth. How can God be in a human being? Saint Paul wrestled with this question, too, and we have his formulation in today's reading from the New Testament book of *Philippians*. Hear Paul's words: "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..." (2.5-8) Paul says that an aspect of God "emptied" Itself/Himself/Herself to become human.

Let's see how Mr. Young puts it: Mackenzie is talking with God the Father who is a big, singing African-American woman. She is speaking.

"When we three spoke Ourselves into human existence as the Son of God, we became fully human. We also chose to embrace all the limitations that this entailed. Even though we have always been present in this created universe, we now became flesh and blood. It would be like this bird, whose nature it is to fly, choosing only to walk and remain grounded. He doesn't stop being the bird, but it does alter his experience of life significantly."

She paused to make sure Mack was still tracking. While there was a definite cramp forming in his brain, he voiced an "Okay...?" inviting her to continue.

"Although by nature he is fully God, Jesus is fully human and lives as such. While never losing the innate ability to fly, he chooses moment-by-moment to remain grounded. That is why his name is Immanuel, God with us, or God with *you*, to be more precise."

"But what about all the miracles? The healings? Raising people from the dead? Doesn't that prove that Jesus was God B you know, more than human?"

"No, it proves that Jesus is truly human."

"What?"

"Mackenzie, *I* can fly, but humans can't. Jesus is fully human. Although he is also fully God, he has *never* drawn upon his nature as God to do anything. He has only lived out of his

relationship with me, living in the very same manner that I desire to be in relationship with every human being. He is just the first to do it to the uttermost B the first to absolutely trust my life within him, the first to believe in my love and my goodness without regard for appearance or consequence.”

“So when he healed the blind?”

“He did so as a dependent, limited human being trusting in my life and power to be at work within him and through him. Jesus, as a human being, had no power within himself to heal anyone.”

That came as a shock to Mack’s religious system. (Pages 99-100)

To return to Paul. The interesting thing is that Paul puts his formulation in the context of a discussion of humility. He cites this “emptying” as an example of God’s humility (!) and therefore an invitation to our humility. If God could humble Herself to the extent of becoming a limited human being, should we not be humble in our acceptance of God’s work and our place in it?

What does humility look like? It’s not the sniveling groveling that most people imagine. It is simply a clear-eyed perception of reality, of our place in it as part of the web of creation, of our dignity as beloved creatures of God, of our incompleteness and “brokenness” in comparison to the infinite beauty and goodness of our Creator. In addition, humility means a conscious choice to put the welfare of the other before our own: “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others,” is the way Paul puts it. (2.4) A modern spiritual writer, Madeline L’Engle, puts it this way: “Humility is throwing oneself away in complete concentration on something or someone else.” (A Circle of Quiet)

In one sense, this is not a sacrifice, for it is one of the ways in which we imitate our Creator and become more like Him. Becoming small is the way to becoming great. Humility is healthy, for the soul who exercises it and for those around her, even when that humility is misunderstood as weakness.

Humility is at once refreshing and difficult. It is difficult because it directly challenges the basic selfishness in which we are born and which we have to learn to renounce. It is refreshing, for it allows us to give up the stressful attempt to be more than we are. It is not complacency, but reality.

In all this humble work, we have God Himself to help us. Paul says, “...for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (2.13) We are not out there all alone, but rather living and working intimately with God, so intimately that we are sometimes surprised by what comes out of us. I suppose it is a bit like God flying in us.

I hope you read *The Shack*. Be patient with the first half, which is setting up the great sadness that afflicts Mackenzie’s life. The heart of the book is in the second half. I pray for each of us that we may learn to fly with God’s power and grace and humility, just as Jesus did.