

---

**Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ**

What's He Talking About?

*A Sermon by*

Judy Green-Davis

Scripture: Philippians 2:1-11

March 22, 2009

Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ  
555 West Glendale Avenue • Phoenix, Arizona 85021  
602-264-1221 • [info@beatitudeschurch.org](mailto:info@beatitudeschurch.org)  
[www.beatitudeschurch.org](http://www.beatitudeschurch.org)

♫ God is still speaking,

Several years ago, we had a pastor here who spoke frequently about the importance of community. Every week, I would go home and say to myself, “What’s he talking about? Why does he keep harping on community?”

Well, then, I had both of my hips replaced in one year. I live alone. I needed help. All of a sudden, those sermons became crystal clear to me. Oh, that’s why community is so important—it’s about caring for each other, praying together, laughing together, and grieving together. I see.

That’s what Paul is talking about in our scripture today. Paul is encouraging the Philippi church toward harmonious and caring behavior. Writing from prison, Paul tells members of this early church to “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus”.

He wants the Philippi community to love their neighbor in the same way that Jesus loved and served his neighbors. Paul writes that Jesus, who had status beyond imagining as “in the form of God” and equal to God, chose to be a “slave” to others when he was born into the human condition.

In contrast, Roman society at the time was a culture of materialism in which status at the expense of others was a consuming goal. Sound familiar?

However, Jesus emptied himself, according to the King James Version of the Bible, “Not of divine attributes but of status; he made himself of ‘no reputation’”. Paul asks these early Christians to refute the prevailing world view and culture of the Romans and give up the idea of personal gain, status, and power.

It’s interesting that verses 5 to 11 of today’s text are actually a song, an ancient hymn. We don’t know how it was sung because standard musical notation didn’t come into common use until the 7th century.<sup>1</sup> But we do know that this hymn was as familiar to the congregation in the early church in Philippi as *Amazing Grace* is to us today. Listen to the words of the hymn:

-----  
 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.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://encyclopedia.farlex.com/notation>, accessed March 17, 2009.

Well, it loses something in translation from the Greek in terms of sing-ability, but you get the idea. Paul included this in his letter as a “moral example for the congregation . . . to imitate.”<sup>2</sup>

Paul’s concept of social order would have been a challenge for the early church even as it is for us today because it is out of the mainstream. In fact, the self-humbling in Christ would actually be a subversion of the Roman system of status, power, and advancement.

It’s also a subversion of our own system today in which the media pressures us to buy the right car, wear the right fashion, have the right sized body, and think mainly of Number One—ourselves.

While Paul’s audiences were Gentile Christians largely from the lower social classes, there were a few members who were wealthy citizens. Regardless, within Greco-Roman social circles at the time, humility was not appreciated. Becoming a “slave” after years of working to achieve social and financial success most certainly would be a difficult concept to embrace.

Paul seems to be saying, that it is not enough to appear to be a servant giving lip-service to caring for one’s neighbor. Rather, believers must empty themselves and become one in action and in living. Can you think of someone who has done such a thing? Do you know someone who has donated a kidney or bone marrow for someone else—perhaps even a stranger? Have you ever worked at a company where employees donated vacation days to help someone in trouble? Do you give hours of your time to volunteer at a nonprofit agency? Have you tutored a child at Maryland School in our church partnership program? Have you increased your giving to the church to help people in need during this economic crisis?

During Lent we’re asked to look inside ourselves and to ponder our dedication to our faith, repent if necessary, and to take a reassessment of our lives. As followers of Christ, we also need to take time to acknowledge that this is not simply a role to play. We must truly work inside ourselves to actually love our neighbor.

Like our former pastor, Paul was never tired of stressing that it is a new nature that is required, not greater human effort; and that the gospel is not about good advice but about the gift of this new nature.<sup>3</sup>

This whole idea of emptying oneself and becoming a slave would have seemed a very dramatic requirement at the time. The members of the community most likely had slaves or were familiar

---

<sup>2</sup> Brian K. Peterson. “Between Text & Sermon: Philippians 2:5-11,” *Interpretation* 58 no. 2 (April 2004): 178-9. Demetrius K. Williams, “Philippians,” *Global Bible Commentary*, Edited by Daniel Patte et al (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2004), 484.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest F. Scott and Robert R. Wicks, “The Epistle to the Philippians,” *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Edited by George Arthur Buttrick et al (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1955) 49. Gunther Bornkamm, “On Understanding the Christ-hymn (Philippians 2: 6-11,” *Early Christian Experience*, Translated by Paul L. Hammer (New York, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969), 115. Claudio Basevi and Juan Chapa, “Philippians 2: 6-11: The Rhetorical Function of a Pauline ‘Hymn,’” Translated by Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht, *Rhetoric and the New Testament, Essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 349. C.F.D. Moule, “Further Reflections on Philippians 2: 5-11,” *Apostolic History and the Gospel, Biblical and Historical Essay*, Edited by W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970) 266, 269-70.

with people who were slaves. They would be well aware that a slave is a person with few rights and whose survival depends on someone else.

Paul is very clearly asking the early Christians to release their most basic human rights even onto death.<sup>4</sup> While this concept seems extreme to us, there is evidence in the martyrdom of early Christians that they made a serious attempt to emulate Christ even onto death.

Paul tells us that in this new Christian social order, status is not measured by the differences between the members but, rather, by their equality with one another and their relationship with Christ as their leader.

So what does all this mean for us today? Perhaps it means that good works are not enough. Perhaps it means that we must truly be present—that we must actually love those that we are seeking to serve.

Perhaps it means that it's not about us but about community...a community in which we can respect our differences, honor our various lifestyles, and work together to act as the body of Christ.

Perhaps it means that everyone should be truly welcome...not just greeted, not just admitted to membership, but actually included and loved in our community.

Perhaps it means that we don't need to give away everything that we own. Instead, Christ is asking us to give away ourselves, to empty ourselves, of our own small concerns, our prejudices, fears, and judgments, in order to truly love our neighbor as we are commanded.

And perhaps it means that we should empty ourselves of our own need for material things, for status, and for looking good. Therein, as the book of Hebrews says, we may entertain angels unawares.

Perhaps.

Amen

---

<sup>4</sup> Moule, *Ibid.*, 268.