

“A Basic Calling to Humility”
Philippians 2:1–13
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In sacramental theology, we distinguish between signs and symbols. A sign has one clear meaning. For example, a red and white octagon with the letters S-T-O-P on it means one thing. We may interpret it to mean “slow down,” “ignore me,” or “write graffiti on me,” at our own risk. But it means one thing—stop! A symbol, on the other hand, is multivalent, it has many meanings and applications.

Within this framework of analysis, the cross is a symbol. It is a rich symbol, central to our faith, but it is a symbol, it has many meanings. In some evangelical circles, it seems to have only one meaning. It is a sign of Christ’s sacrifice for us. And this is one important aspect of the cross. But the cross also points to God’s companionship in suffering. And it is a pattern for our lives, as Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him.

It is this latter understanding that the Apostle Paul emphasizes in our reading from his letter to the church at Philippi. “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,” Paul says, “but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

Some ancient manuscripts include a Greek word – *kai* – which means “also.” “Look not to your own interests, but *also* to the interests of others,” the text reads, and this provides a helpful perspective. The goal is not self-abasement but a way of living together that allows everyone’s needs to be met. But for this to happen, we must consider the needs of others. It is a basic calling to humility.

And lest anyone think this is just Paul’s philosophy of life, he makes it clear why he commends this way. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” he says, “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.” Paul is calling the Philippians and us to a way of life shaped by the cross, a way of humble self-giving, putting others first, not demanding what is due to us but sacrificing for others.

This way of life is not viewed as a virtue in Roman culture, to say the least, nor is it in ours. It is a radically different way.

We are taught to look after number one. We are raised with the American ideal of rugged individualism. It is a part of why we struggled to gain full compliance on simple public health recommendations during the worst of COVID-19, like wearing masks, because each of us feels entitled to get our way. And individual rights and freedoms are central to our heritage, but when they are pursued to the exclusion of community concerns, everyone suffers.

There are many African proverbs which speak to the value of community. *"If you want to go far, go together... When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion... Cross the river in a crowd, and the crocodile will not eat you... There is no me without us...* We think we are smarter than everyone else in the world, but on this matter, we could learn much from African culture, and Latinx culture, even European culture. Everyone else seems to value community more than us, and valuing community means thinking of others first.

Paul recommends this cruciform kind of humility for life in the church because it makes sense for followers of Jesus, and it is a key to unity. He wants the Philippians to be of the same mind, of one mind, he says, but he doesn't mean agreement on all matters. He is talking about having the mind of the Christ who laid down his life for others. He is talking about humility. William Sloane Coffin once said, we can build a community out of seekers of truth, but not out of possessors of truth. Humility brings people together, arrogance tears people apart.

I don't know if this is still the case, but there was a time when the Christian groups which shared the care of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the Old City of Jerusalem, the traditional site of the crucifixion with the burial tomb of Jesus, were so at odds with each other that a Muslim had to keep the key to the church. Each group was

so convinced it was right about certain issues and the others were wrong that they could not work peaceably together. The irony of having no capacity for humility while honoring a site where Christ laid down his life for others is beyond comprehension.

And yet, as we know all too well, it is not just Christians connected to that church who have struggled with this challenge. Within churches, people have various opinions on theology, social issues, specific traditions, paint color, which side of the sanctuary the piano should be on, etc., ad infinitum, ad nauseum. And some of these things matter, but not more than our basic calling to follow Christ. And none of us is right about everything, so a little humility can go a long way.

The ecumenical church struggles with these same challenges. The body of Christ benefits from its diversity, but often we undermine this benefit by assuming that our way of doing things is the only way. Years ago, in one my doctoral classes, a Presbyterian colleague led a baptismal liturgy. He began by dipping his finger in the baptismal font and asking, “What do I have here?” I wanted to say, mostly in jest, “Not enough water,” but I resisted the urge.

For the truth is infant baptism and adolescent confirmation are not that different from child dedication and believer’s baptism. We prefer the latter, but our preference is not justification for requiring rebaptism, AKA Baptist hazing. Since we don’t view the ritual as the saving event, why would we demand that people do it our way to join our club... that is, church? Thankfully, we do not require re-baptism, but many Baptist churches do.

Individual churches struggle with conflicts born of ego and self-interest, as does the ecumenical church, and the global church as well. There was a time when Western churches, particularly American churches, saw ourselves as God’s vehicle for saving the world. On June 29, 1948, Levi Elder Barton said this, “I am more tremendously convinced more than ever that the last hope, the fairest hope, the only hope for evangelizing this world on New Testament principles is the Southern Baptist people represented in that convention. I mean no unkindness to anybody on earth, but if you call that bigotry, then make the most of it (*God’s Last and Only Hope*, Bill Leonard).”

God's last and only hope... well, in the year 2023, the Western church as a whole, Baptists and everyone else, is struggling, while the church in the Southern hemisphere, the church in sub-Saharan, the church in parts of Asia, is thriving. While we still send missionaries to them, they send missionaries to us. We could get our backs up about this. What we are wiser to do is demonstrate a little humility, realize we have much to learn from others, and give thanks for them. We all serve the same Christ, we all seek to follow the same Christ.

Humility is a central calling for followers of the One who laid down his life for others, it helps build unity in the church, and it is a quality that enhances our witness. We live in a time of overblown egos and self-assertion, a time when everyone shouts and no one listens, a time when narcissistic tendencies have become common. The church offers nothing different or helpful by simply reflecting these values, but if we model a more humble way of being, listening to others, valuing their needs and perspectives, we offer something needed.

During a trip I made to sub-Saharan Africa with a team of medical professionals, we faced an important decision. We were working in a predominately Muslim area and partnering with some incredibly generous and courageous Muslim women who were nurses. The women on our team were asked to wear a hijab because it was the cultural norm.

It was not our practice, of course, and our nurses and doctors might have taken offense and used this as an occasion to articulate the American view of women as equal, but this was not our culture, these Muslim nurses wearing hijabs were strong leaders, and to our women it just seemed like the right thing to do was to honor their wishes. It didn't take much, just a little humility, but it went a long way to building community.

How might the church benefit if we were willing to consider the needs and perspectives of others? How might our society benefit if we were willing to do this?

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but 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...” This is our calling.