

First Mennonite Church, Urbana, IL
Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday
16 March 2008

“He let go heaven”
(Philippians 2:5-11)
David Wright

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/grasped
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.

Joy and its Discontents

Today, we have begun our service by focusing on Palm Sunday, that brief glimpse of celebration and glory that erupts before the humility of Maundy Thursday and the darkness of Good Friday.

Palm Sunday is a day of exuberant song and public rejoicing, a time of waving branches and strewing the streets with cloaks and robes for the oddly heroic entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem. Quite a parade, however temporary.

On a much smaller (but no less raucous) scale I think of my daughter’s birthday party two weekends ago. As our home gradually filled with eleven and twelve year old girls, the swirl of energetic chatter and spontaneous singing grew and grew, sweeping everyone up in reverie, gossip, and dancing. Our three year old son leapt into the whirlwind, singing and dancing with his sister and her friends. I performed my most exotic, embarrassing dance moves, straight out of the 70s and 80s. The girls ate junk, drank strawberry smoothies, banged on the piano and enjoyed themselves until all hours of the night—no real thought about tomorrow, no desire to sleep, no doubt that jubilation was the order of the day (and night).

As those of you who are parents well know, however, the next day the post-sleepover hangover can be equally intense as the groggy, snarky pre-teens drag their bodies, once so alive with energy, through the motions of cleaning up and heading home. Despite the streamers still dangling from the ceiling fan, it can be hard to recall the joy.

A Grounded and Peculiar Joy

Of the several lectionary texts for this morning, I have chosen to focus on the Christ hymn from chapter two of Philippians. As far as I am concerned, no more eloquent Christian liturgy exists. This picture of the Savior—its simultaneous affirmation of both Jesus’ deity and humanity, its vision of his service and humility, its assurance of Christ’s ultimate exaltation—distills the whole of Christian belief and practice into one intense and challenging and lovely collection of poetic/musical lines.

Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi is, itself, a testament to a differently grounded and peculiar kind of joy. Hardly at a party or a parade, Paul writes to the Philippians from prison:

“I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, . . . for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 1:3-5, 7-8)

The joy Paul expresses in this epistle appears rooted in a territory beyond his own circumstance and beyond even his fond affection for others. He grounds his joy instead on a deeper hope. His hope comes not from them but because of their shared experience of knowing and living out the Gospel (and its costs): “[F]or I know through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ” writes Paul, “what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” (Phi. 1: 19-21).

No Other Foundation/Re-Minded in Christ

The ground of **our** hope as believers then is the same as the source of Paul’s hope and joy: the person and work of Jesus Christ. As Paul puts it elsewhere (and as Menno Simons inscribed on all of his writings): “For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” Or as the NRSV translates it: “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11).

So much of Paul’s pastoral writing seems to me to grow from this very urgency and purpose: he wants to remind these gatherings of believers of the source of their faith, their hope, their fellowship, and their joy. We too could stand to be re-minded that the service and worship we do together are not the foundations of our lives. The hymns we sing, the joy we find in one another, the care we render one another, the service we offer the world together--these do not form a sufficient ground or our hope. If the ground of our joy and hope is merely one another and our own work, then when our worship wanes (which it will), when we irritate and damage one another (which we will), when we fail the world around us (and Christian history tells us nothing if not that), or when we move/die/leave one another behind (which will also happen), we will be left joyless, hopeless. Like the 12 yr old girls at the party, like the palm waving revelers, they will all go home at some point. When we find ourselves alone, with only memory and a sugar high to sustain us, then what?

Paul knows what it’s like to be left without the presence of sisters and brothers nearby, to endure the bleakest of circumstances. And he knows what it’s like to try and pastor believers who too often abandon the territories of hope and joy and migrate instead to “striving and vainglory.” So, just before the canticle I read earlier, Paul gives this admonition:

“If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being

like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2: 1-4).

Paul identifies here the legalistic futility and graceless folly of saving ourselves. When we try on our own to resist selfish ambition or vanity, when we attempt by our own strength to humbly consider others better than ourselves, we will nearly always fail. To be a community of like-minded women and men, united in spirit and purpose, bound together in love, will require that we inhabit a common space beyond our making, something that also inhabits us, what Paul calls “the mind of Christ.” Encouragement, comfort, fellowship, tenderness, compassion and joy cannot emanate from our mere will, our guilt, or our best intentions but, rather, will come, in Paul’s terms, from “being united with Christ,” by being **re-minded**, given a new and better mind, “the mind of Christ.”

And so, to help us inhabit and be inhabited by such a mind, Paul gives us, oddly, a hymn, this most vivid reminder of what it looks like to have the “mind of Christ.” Now, before I spend a little time exploring this hymn, let me identify what I think are two mistaken versions of having “the mind of Christ.”

First, we want to recognize that to have Christ’s mind is not something we do alone. Paul’s primary mission is to help a community of Christians to be more Christ-like in their life together. This communal (rather than individual) endeavor can be seen, says one commentator in the way Paul says, “Let this mind/attitude be in you,” a phrase that “primarily means ‘among you,’ that is, ‘in your community relationships.’ But the only way for that to happen . . . is for each one to assume the responsibility for such a disposition. Thus each is to have this mindset ‘in you’ so that it will be fully manifested ‘among you’ (Fee, Philipians).

Second, the mind of Christ is not a set of intellectual positions, a grid of systematic beliefs. It is not a mere ethical system. As John Howard Yoder says it, “Christian behavior is Christological, drawing its guidance not from a set of general philosophical principles nor from a collection of codified precise obligations, but from the person and the teachings of Jesus”ⁱ The mind of Christ, then is more like set of posture, a constant turning of ourselves over to a deep encounter with the person of Jesus. Our belief is not mere ascent but is a communal and transformative opening of our hands that we reenact again and again, regardless of results. It is a turning away from ourselves and our status on behalf of another. What an impossible agenda. This, I think, might explain why Paul gives us liturgy, a creed or hymn rather than a propositional argument. So, to the hymn.

The Carmen Christi

Outside of the Psalter and the Magnificat, few biblical texts have been set to music as often as Philipians 2:6-11. Perhaps even now you are humming one of the many choral or hymn tunes that adapt these lines—“May the mind of Christ my Savior” or “And can it be” or the “What wondrous love is this.” While some scholars express doubt about the liturgical lineage of these verses,ⁱⁱ they have always seemed to most readers like an early Christian hymn, one that Paul either quotes or adapts for his purposes in this letter (and, at the end of my sermon, I’ll explain why I think this is a particularly powerful notion for both the prospect of hymnody and for the journey of following Christ).

It is important for me, as well, to mention that, as beloved as this passage has been, it has proven equally controversial among textual scholars and theologians. While nearly all acknowledge its importance, many contend the sources of the passage’s imagery and language, the precise meanings of particular terms, and the implications for understanding Christ’s humanity and Divinity. As a poet and a hymn writer, I am unlikely to solve such concerns, though I will suggest that often, as is the case

with many interpretive acts, these hermeneutical tussles can become a welcome distraction from the more daunting task of living the text as best we can. The determination to fix meaning, rather than follow it, is one of my own besetting sins.

So, with the hope in mind of following the text rather than fixing it, let me look at three moments, or movements in this passage, all of which elaborate a **powerful pattern—relinquished status-willing servanthood-ultimate exaltation—that is echoed throughout scripture.**

He let go

Most of the debate over this passage's meaning comes from its first two verses:

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited/grasped,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

As I understand it, it is the nature of Jesus' grasping and emptying that have caused most of the problems (and, from my perspective, raise most of the possibilities) within this text. What might it mean that, though he had the form of God, Christ did not grasp or exploit his position? The term for holding on has been translated as robbery, exploitation, grasping (my favorite).ⁱⁱⁱ

Some, seeking to deny the Divinity of Christ, suggest that this is pretty good evidence that Jesus was NOT co-equal with God but rather had a mere form or likeness of godhood, and that this was something he released rather than striving to keep.

Others, and I agree with them, assert that Paul here is asserting/describing the pre-existence of Christ as a part of the Godhead.

I suggest that we remember where this passage occurs in Paul's writing. He is using Christ's example to illustrate a set of admonition and instructions for a community about how to get along. How difficult is it for any of us to relinquish our grip on a position that is rightly ours? As John of Chrysostom wrote centuries ago in his *Homily on Philippians*, when someone with real power "humbles himself, that one is humble. But when his humility comes from impotence, that is not what you would call humility . . . It is a humility of a great sort to refrain from seizing power, to be obedient to death"^{iv}

So here Paul shows how a member of the ultimate community—the Trinity—co-equal Father, Son and Holy Spirit—let go, opened his hands and emptied himself, for a time, of the pleasures and privileges of such communion and intimacy, and that he did so on the behalf of others, on our behalf.

The term for such emptying, **kenosis**, forms the other flashpoint for debating this passage. When he emptied himself, scholars ask, what exactly did Christ relinquish, and how? And was this voluntary or coerced?

Referring to this passage John Calvin writes: "In order to exhort us to submission by His example, he shows, that when as God he might have displayed to the world the brightness of His glory, he gave up His right, and voluntarily emptied Himself; that he assumed the form of a servant, and, contented with that humble condition, suffered His divinity to be concealed under a veil of flesh."^v

That's one classic understanding. Still, it's unlikely we'll ever understand fully the complex

transaction that results when the very form of God takes on human flesh. However, what I recognize in this description is the power and fear I feel when I am faced with letting go my most cherished possessions—my reputation, my position my status. I fear beyond words finding myself fragile and vulnerable. And how much less do I have to lose than did Jesus Christ?

For a moment, I want to talk about the hymn we will sing following this sermon. “He let go heaven from his grasp” began as an exercise with a class last semester at Wheaton College. We were working, together, to adapt this very passage, to set it to the familiar tune “O Waly, Waly.” Our attempts were weak, in part, because we failed/I failed to remember that for poetry (or hymnody) to work it must engage more than our minds. It must be more than a literal transcription of what we already know.

It wasn’t until later that evening, in re-reading the passage that I recalled the advice I would be likely to give one of my own student writers. When a piece is failing to come to life, I will usually ask something like this: Where is the body? Embody this abstraction, I will urge.

And so I noticed that the action of the passage, the amazing, embodied act begins not when Jesus descends but before Jesus descends. He lets go, he opens his hand in a gesture of infinite humility and holiness. And it is from this that his other acts proceed—his kneeling as a servant, his dying, and his body being filled with breath again.

If I had been smarter, I would have remembered John Milton’s description from a portion of his famous “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” where he wonders and celebrates “That glorious Form, that Light unsufferable, /And that far-beaming blaze of Majesty”

He laid aside; and here with us to be,
Forsook the Courts of everlasting day,
And chose with us a darksome house of mortal clay.

What would possess the Divine to dwell in the “darksome house of mortal clay” rather than the light of “everlasting day?” The answers are plentiful, but one question recurs to me again and again. What if to have the “mind of Christ” is to reckon that perhaps it is in God’s very character, God’s nature to do this, to relinquish what could be grasped, clutched, fixed, to let go rather than to torque the world into position by sheer strength? The most radical suggestion here is not that Jesus, in his kenosis, gave up Godhood (which I fully believe he did not), but that in his pouring out of his privilege he showed even more fully the form and nature of God.

What if, as one scholar has asked, the vulnerability associated with self-emptying is in fact an attribute of divinity, a feature or sign of divine power rather than a contradiction of the divine?^{vi}

It makes me think of the philosopher Hannah Arendt when she writes that while ““Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it”^{vii} Here, in the act of opening his hand rather than gripping his status is Jesus most powerful. Here, by the world’s standards, is a powerful and strange foundation of our faith indeed. Think of this as we walk across the palms and into this week of the darkness before resurrection Sunday.

He knelt a servant

It’s instructive then to look at the next moment in this passage, that of Jesus being found in human likeness and taking the form of a servant or slave. Again, I ask the question, how does this image connect to the life of the community Paul seeks to instruct? For Mennonites, the closest thing we have to a sacrament, besides singing perhaps, is foot washing, and the downward movement of Jesus in this

passage clearly parallels the foot washing narrative in John 13 (as well as the suffering servant passage in Isaiah 52).

I think the relevance of this act, of this posture for us is in how it directs our attentions away from ourselves and towards others. Lutheran pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes Jesus as the "man for others who bends himself to struggle for the wholeness and healing of a wounded world" and he writes that the "church is the church only when it exists for others. . . . The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving. . . . It must not underestimate the importance of human example which has its origin in the humanity of Jesus."^{viii}

The incarnation, Jesus as fully God and fully human, is reinforced in this example, and thus when Jesus humbles himself to "death, even death on a cross" (as the text so poetically repeats itself) we see no Gnostic redeemer myth, no costless grace, no disembodied spirit. Jesus does not, in the words of St. Augustine, "take on his humanity in the simple way that a person puts on clothes as something exterior to him. Rather he took on human form in a manner inexpressibly more excellent and more intimate than that."^{ix}

This act of human servant hood, even unto death, is prophesied by Isaiah's suffering servant, the one "took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows" so that "by his by his wounds we are healed" (Is. 53: 4-5). Yet it is even beyond that type. This Divine narrative of descent and service, Christ's life and death, as Eusebius describes it, form the ultimate "record of his compassion . . . So he willed to be joined to our human condition. He took to himself the toils of the members who suffer. He suffered and toiled on our behalf. This is in accord with his great love of humankind"^x

Let me temper old Augustine and Eusebius here with their fellow theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, whose words might resonate with our brothers Ken, Wilmer and Dan as they have just returned from Colombia. Jesus, in his act of "voluntary impoverishment," writes Gutierrez did not take on our "sinful conditions and its impoverishment to idealize it. It is rather because of love for and solidarity with [those] who suffer in it. It is to redeem them from their and to enrich them with his poverty. It is to struggle against human selfishness and everything that divides men [and women] and enables there to be rich and poor, possessors and disposed, oppressor and oppressed."^{xi}

We enter into this Holy Week with this paradox in our hearts, in our bodies, in our minds—"that though he was in very nature God," Christ takes on human form, the form of a servant as the means by which all humanity might be redeemed. As the hymn we will sing later says, "When I was sinking down, sinking down, sinking down, Christ laid aside his crown for me soul."

For Mennonites this incarnational, demanding, even impossible notion of Jesus is no abstraction, no idea to be formulated. This is no tautology to be merely articulated and debated. The "mind of Christ" is not a "certain emotional state or set of intellectual propositions." Instead, as I mentioned earlier, the mind of Christ is a posture to be practiced every day, in all our lives, as part of a community of other servants. As the early Anabaptist Hans Denck said, "No one can truly know Christ except one who follows him in life."^{xii}

And so we live the text as best we are able. And in so doing we might come to resist "the persistent temptation of confusing the language we use to talk about God with the essence of Christian faith." Instead of the "stubborn human tendency to turn doctrine into an idol," we want to never forget that even Jesus himself did not cling to abstraction and certainty. Instead of potentially coercive love of doctrine we want to cultivate and always sacrificial love of others. This I will try to remember on Maundy Thursday this week as we kneel to wash one another's feet, as we serve food, or as we clear

tables. Like Jesus, we give up our lives, we loosen our grip and open our hands that those lives and hands might be transformed.

His name exalted

The final section of these verses is perhaps most familiar to us as it celebrates the ultimate exaltation of Jesus as Lord. It seems so familiar to me that I was surprised to be reminded of how radical and revolutionary it would have to at least two groups in Paul's day.

First, Paul applies language to Jesus here from Isaiah 45: 22-23, language applied by the Hebrew people only to God:

Turn to me and be saved,
all you ends of the earth;
for I am God, and there is no other.

By myself I have sworn,
my mouth has uttered in all integrity
a word that will not be revoked:
Before me every knee will bow;
by me every tongue will swear.

Isaiah makes it "very clear that every knee will bow to God, and every tongue will swear by him. But Phil. 2:10-11 asserts that knees will bow to Jesus and tongues will confess him . . . as lord. This represents an audacious redirection of one of the most stringently monotheistic passages in the entire Hebrew Bible"^{xiii} While it is clear that Christ's exaltation here is work of the Father, it is equally clear that this exaltation would challenge the tradition from which Jewish believers had emerged. Add to this the humility and suffering already praised in the passage and we get a sense of how radical the "mind of Christ" was for Paul and his audience.

On top of this, N. T. Wright (among others) argues that in these verses the Apostle makes an immediate and revolutionary statement against the Roman rulers who have him captive:

"Paul was consciously modeling the poem and its portrait of Jesus, not simply on Adam and Israel . . . but also on Caesar (or rather perhaps on the whole tradition of arrogant emperors going back at least to Alexander the Great, with the Roman emperors as the current embodiment of the type). Jesus . . . is the reality of which Caesar is the parody."^{xiv}

As comforting and familiar as we might find these words of exaltation and praise, they, over anything else Paul says here, would have inflamed the communities and social settings within which these believers lived. Again, the "mind of Christ," though the home of hope and joy, is no comfortable territory, is not a mere sweetness to be imbibed. The mind of Christ is a radical set of postures, of revolutionary and uncomfortable turns. He crossed over the palms celebration into his own suffering and death. This is a strange King.

Let this hymn be in you

So let us return to song. Today is, after all, a day of celebration, Jesus entering the streets of his beloved city on a blanket of palms and praises. And I promised to return to this passage AS hymnody. Of course I cannot verify its existence in the early Christian church. What other "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" might Paul have drawn into this letter and invited the Philippians to let "dwell richly in their hearts" (Col. 3:16)?

I want though, to suggest, that RE-MINDING us is one of the primary purposes of singing together, a purpose Paul echoes in Col. 3 which I have in turn echoed. Hymns enter our bodies, come from our bodies, and join us to the immediate, the historical, and the global body of Christ. Music has this kind of power (mention *Musicophilia* by Oliver Sacks?).^{xv} Music is a type for the incarnational belief that drives the church—the language of faith becoming animated in our very flesh, on our tongues as we are joined to others who help raise our voices as one voice to God. Such worship is the reflection of and the result of Christ’s radical decision to let go heaven from his grasp and take on fragile flesh and bone, and, in so doing, to offer us a kind of power, now, that goes beyond ourselves and our circumstances. Think of Paul himself in prison with Silas, raising up his voice in a hymn that shook the very earth (Acts 16: 25-34).

When we sing together, we engage more than our brain and more than the mere mechanics of sound. We instead, exalt God in our bodies, in our whole selves through the vibration, the harmony of breath and word. Let me encourage us today to be RE-MINDED, to let this hymn be in you, in me. To have this hymn always in our memories and on our tongues would reform our thoughts and words so that we might not even recognize our own speech. To live this hymn in our daily lives of work and rest would transform both ourselves and our communities. To imbibe the radical hope of this hymn would revolutionize us. And, if we believe at all the end of this passage, this hymn will indeed be one we will sing again along with every tongue that forms the name of Jesus on earth, and under the earth, and heaven. Amen.

- ⁱ John Howard Yoder, "The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision", *Concern* 18 (July 1971): 14.
- ⁱⁱ See Gordon D. Fee, "Philippians 2:5-11: Hymn or Exalted Pauline Prose?" *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 2 (1992): 29-46, as well as his *Philippians (IVP New Testament Commentary Series)*. Westmont, IL: InterVarsity P, 1999.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See Moisés Silva. *Philippians, (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005. Silva writes that this term "has created a literature far more extensive than it probably deserves" (116). Then again, isn't that the entire academic endeavor, praise God.
- ^{iv} Homily on Philippians 7.2.5-8. qtd. in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament VIII: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*. Ed. Mark J. Edwards. Westmont, IL: InterVarsity P, 1999. 240.
- ^v John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 2, Chapter 13, pt.2.
<<http://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/institutes/bookii/bookii25.htm>.>
- ^{vi} Biesecker-Mast, Gerald. "The Way of the Cross, the Grain of the Universe, and Pacifist Epistemology." Bluffton University. 15 Mar. 2008 <<http://www.bluffton.edu/~mastg>>
- ^{vii} *On Violence*. 56.
- ^{viii} Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 2nd ed., Ed. Eberhard Bethge. New York: Macmillan, 1971. 202-4.
- ^{ix} Augustine, *On Diverse Questions*, 73. qtd. in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament VIII: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*. Ed. Mark J. Edwards. Westmont, IL: InterVarsity P, 1999. 248.
- ^x Eusebius of Caesarea. Demonstration of the Gospel. 10.1.22. qtd. in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament VIII: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*. Ed. Mark J. Edwards. Westmont, IL: InterVarsity P, 1999. 246-47.
- ^{xi} *A Theology of Liberation*. New York: Orbis, 1973. 300.
- ^{xii} The shape of these ideas (and the unattributed quotations) come from John D. Roth's *Beliefs: Mennonite Faith and Practice*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005. 31-32.
- ^{xiii} David Seeley. "The Background of the Philippians Hymn (2:6-11)." *Institute for Higher Critical Studies JHC* 1 (Fall 1994): 49-72. <<http://www.depts.drew.edu/jhc/seelyphl.html>>
- ^{xiv} N. T. Wright. *Resurrection of the Son of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol. 3*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.
- ^{xv} See Sacks, Oliver. *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*. New York: Knopf, 2007 for an amazing account of recent thought on music and its physiological power (for both ill and good). Also, for a vivid description of how Christian song in particular affects us in our body and in the Body of Christ, see John Bell's *The Singing Thing: A Case for Congregational Song*. Chicago: GIA Publications, 2000.