

“True Humility: Trust and Obey” based on Philippians 2:1-18

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, Oct. 1, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

When I was a reporter, I had a colleague who had a heart of gold, but like all of us, was flawed. I won't use his real name, but since a name is central to my story, I'll call him John Calvin. One night we ordered a white pizza topped with broccoli and ricotta cheese. Here in the South, I'm not sure you know this amazing pizza delicacy. But basically, in and around NYC, this is a common treat. It is absolutely my favorite pizza. It has no sauce, just ricotta cheese, mozzarella, and broccoli. Well, in Northern NY, like here in the South, this was very rarely available.

I wanted to introduce John to this pizza and so we ordered it from his favorite pizza place and they didn't know what it was. So, I explained, just as I did a moment ago. The person on the phone asked to clarify, "So, you want no sauce?" I said, "Yes." He asked, "Do you want garlic?" I said, "Sure, every pizza always needs garlic." So, a half an hour later, our pizza arrived to our great anticipation. I bit in with all of my hope, all of my joy, and all of my love, and it disappeared. In place of the sauce, rather than spreading ricotta across, it was a quarter-inch thick layer of minced garlic.

So, of course, my buddy and I proceeded to eat the whole thing – yes, an 18-inch, yes 254 square inch pie – between us. The next day, we played basketball at lunch time, and we wreaked of garlic in our sweat. So, when we got back to the office, John called the owner of the pizza place, recalling a time he had interviewed her for a story. He explained what happened, what we ordered, and what arrived. She apologized, said it was an unusual order, but that she knew the pizza from time she spent in New York herself. And she said our next pizza would be "on the house." I'm not sure we had any right to a free pizza, but hey, free pizza is free pizza.

So, a few nights later at another friend's house, John called to make our order of pizza and wings. He calls and said, "I'm John Calvin and Debbie said that I would get a free pizza on my next order." The person on the phone said he didn't know anything about a free pizza for him. So, my friend repeated himself to the man on the phone, "I don't know if you know, but I'm John Calvin. And I'm on Debbie's list." The man replied that he was Debbie's husband, and he was unaware that she had any kind of list. The man put John on hold, presumably, I think, to call his wife and verify the story.

He came back on, and we got our pizza for free, along with our whole order – not expected. A half an hour later, I looked at the friend whose house we were at and we realized we were making a very risky decision. We chose to eat the pizza – regardless of whether or not there was spit underneath the cheese. From that point on, we never let John order another pizza when we were hanging out and we never let him live down his strange attempt to misuse his position as a local journalist at a small Upstate New York newspaper.

You see, John made a power play here, using his name as a veiled threat of bad press and obtained a free meal, which then came at the expense of his dignity for years. We often made fun of him, "I don't know if you know, but I'm John Calvin." But as blatant as his actions were, let's be honest, this is the norm in human life.

In every circumstance, whether or not we are conscious of it, we are always evaluating the power structure of a room. We're always figuring out what our role is in that room – whether we are at an advantage or a disadvantage. Power is the top commodity in our culture, and even more expressly so in Paul's time. The most-wealthy person in the world can be powerless in certain

circumstances, and even the best education is often neutralized in different settings. And so, it is normal any time we enter a situation for us to take stock of our surroundings, and determine the margins – how we fit in, or how we don't. In every interaction, there is a power dynamic at play and we can wield power or be subject to it.

In our reading today, Paul is speaking directly to these power dynamics in Philippi. As noted last week, this was a colony of the City of Rome in Macedonia, what is now Greece. It was named for the father of Alexander the Great, King Philip, who conquered it or settled it. It was built up by Marc Antony who settled retired Roman soldiers there, before Emperor Augustus re-founded it with 1,000 colonists from Rome, giving the colonists citizenship, the right of self-government, and an exemption from Roman taxes. It was good to be part of the elite class there. It was the little Rome on the Aegean Sea, and a place where power traded well in an honor and shame culture.

In the opening of the letter, Paul speaks upfront about his being imprisoned – his shame. But he tells them that it is being used for good because he is spreading the gospel. He then writes about other preachers proclaiming the gospel, saying some are doing it out of envy. These, he says, are intending to add to his suffering in prison.

They are highlighting the shame of someone in prison to increase their own honor – “That Paul is in prison, but we are preaching out here. We are favored by God.” Ultimately, Paul says he rejoices, not in their ill motives, but that the gospel is being preached by them. He trusts that God will iron out the details and use what is meant in bad faith for good, for the Kingdom of God.

Still, this is not how it should be, he notes. Paul tells the people continually that instead, they should live lives worthy of the gospel. In other words, our actions have to match our words, even if we speak the truth. It's easier said than done. He begins by speaking highly of them, and I'm sure you can hear their response: “If there is any encouragement in Christ,” and they nod, “yes there is!” “If there is any comfort of love,” and they nod, “yes there is!” “If there is a fellowship or common life in the Spirit, and if there are deep seated feelings and compassion,” again, the nodding, “yes, there is!” “Then make my joy complete,” Paul says. “Have the same mindset and love.”

I can imagine the nodding ending, or at least slowing down as they heard this read aloud. Sameness was not prized in their culture with all of its levels of power and influence built in. This may have been horrifying - After all, how do we differentiate ourselves then? How do we get perks? How do we move up the ladder in this church, if we don't climb, and in doing so, climb over others, all of us striving for the top?

Now, this sameness is not uniformity in cultural practices or social mores (customs), but a sameness in mindset and love. This is an adjustment to our way of thinking and our manner of acting, so that it emulates the anointed King, the Christ, Jesus in our lives. This means using our individual gifts and talents not as a way to rise up in a society, but to contribute to the betterment of the society in which we live. It is not meant to suppress individual excellence or expression, but to give our excellence and expression a true purpose, through Christ's ministry of reconciliation.

As Paul puts it, “Do nothing according to selfish ambition or according to pride, but in humility regard others as superior – as better than yourself. Do not look out for yourself, your own interests, but look out for others' interests. Let the same mindset be in you that was in Jesus be in you.” Paul lays this out as the cornerstone of our faith, which Bruce and the choir masterfully put to music

today. In the Greek, Paul suddenly breaks into poetic verse, and so, some think he was quoting a hymn, already being sung in the ancient church or he was writing one to be sung.

The hymn says, "beginning in the form of God," using the Greek word, "*huparcho*," which means something you already have, a beginning, your existence. In Homer's poetry, it is clear from context that he uses this as "beginning," though often in our translations of Paul, it just says existed. I believe Paul is establishing the foundation of Christian belief, that the God whom Paul sought in his prayers as a Pharisee appeared to him at Damascus in the form of Jesus, a human being who also happened to be fully one with God.

So it is then that the Messiah Jesus, did not regard his equality with God, as something to be exploited. This means something to be taken advantage of, or as a possession to grasp and use, but emptied himself, giving up his advantage to take the form of a servant, as one enslaved, in the likeness of a human being, and being in that condition – being human – he humbled himself, having become obedient even to the point of death, death on a cross. Already obedient to God's will, he then obeyed our human limits, even when it meant death on a Roman cross.

Paul lays it out here – God humbly shared in our humanity, in our life and in our death, even the most shameful death imaginable – He was hanged naked on a cross to suffer. Friends, as Paul is telling the Philippians to stop worrying about honor, about how they are perceived by others. He says to lay down their power, using Jesus, who is the Son of God, as an example. Jesus took on our flesh, laid down every honor and died a shameful death, which was used to tell the world "do not follow him, or else the Lord Caesar will do this to you too!" But the church instead responds, "Jesus is Lord, and also that Caesar is not."

Indeed, in a reference to Isaiah 45, Paul says that God gives Jesus the name above all names. This did not mean that divinity was a gift to Jesus, but that it was his true identity. For in Isaiah, it is the Lord God to whom every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess. Paul adds that the Messiah Jesus is the Lord God, which gives glory, to God the Father. His oneness with God does not detract from the Father.

I'm not going to deep dive into Trinitarian theology here and lose you, but the point Paul is making is that Jesus is fully God who became fully human. Get math out of your heads right now. This is not a math problem. This is a reality of a self-emptying, self-giving love. God joined fully in our humanity. That is central to the character of Israel's God, but not to Rome's gods. When they became human they exploited every advantage they had whenever they could, and encouraged everyone who believed in them to do the same, because that is Rome's way.

But Israel's God is an example of self-giving love. The history of Israel's God's dealing with Israel as a people has always been to say, "right is right and wrong is wrong." This is applied the same to kings as to the common citizen. It doesn't matter if you have honor and are rich or are poor and have suffered shame. What's more God remained faithful, even when many of the people worshiped other gods.

There were consequences, yes, but God was faithful to the promises, sending the Son, equal to the Father, to do what the elect did not do. Indeed, Jesus became human to be a light to all nations, fulfilling the law, so that all might carry God's Spirit as temples. Through Jesus and the Spirit, we are empowered to share in God's work like Christ, in humility, service, and forgiveness.

Beloved, like Christ, when we assess the power in a room, we have the opportunity to lay down our advantage and use our gifts from God, our excellence, to benefit others, trusting in God as Jesus did. This is hard to do. As humans, we love to use influence for our own advantage. It may be innocuous, like veiled threats of our power to get a free pizza. Or perhaps, we use comparison and gossip to put someone down, or we protect our own interests, our own comfort, even if we know there's something wrong about it and someone else may suffer because of our choice. We do it also just to center our own self-worth in our superiority or supremacy in some way over another person.

Instead, Paul says that we should work out our salvation with fear and trembling. This is not to say that we earn our salvation, but that if we trust that it is already accomplished, then we can lay down our power, our advantage, and do God's will to benefit others. Often this is more difficult, something to fear, something to tremble at, because when we act in service, especially to those on the margins, lifting others up, it's hard. The way of Christ, who did this, leads to the cross.

So then, if there is encouragement in the grace of Jesus – who he is and what he's done for us. If there is comfort in knowing that we are loved by God first without earning it. If there is any fellowship, a common life with one another, in the Holy Spirit, then we too should aim to make Paul's joy and God's complete, by trusting in that grace, love, and community of the Triune God. In this trust we can humbly lay down our advantages in the mind and love of Christ.

As I said earlier, anyone can feel marginalized at any time. So, if you are in a spot when you feel marginalized, know God loves you. And in those times when you have power, remember the marginalized and lift them up. This is the mindset of Christ, to trust God's love in our afflictions to deliver us, and when in power, we do not seek our own advantage, but lay power down, using our gifts and our lives to raise up those who are afflicted.

This is what it means to trust and obey – it means humility. Our piety, our theology, our favored cultural norms should not be another means to power as if this earns us something that can be used against someone else. No, the good news is that we do not obey to earn God's love, but that we trust in God's love for us and God's presence with us comes first.

It is the means by which we forget this broken world's system of shame and honor, and in place of that, we ask the Spirit, which pours God's love in our hearts, to lead in using that love and our gifts for others. We do this just as Jesus did because that is how we reveal the Kingdom of God and God's love for all. Amen.