

A Call to Humility

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For this next reading, I invite us all to take a deep breath first. Maybe close your eyes if you like. I also ask you to try to take these words in not only with your minds, but in your hearts and bodies as well. What words and phrases stand out for you? And how does your body change and feel as you hear them. Ready?

A reading from Paul's Letter to the Church at Philippi.

4: 2 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, **2** make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. **3** Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. **4** Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. **5** Let the same mind be in you that was [a] in Christ Jesus,

6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
9 Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God [the Father].

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always [followed] me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable to you, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

So, I wonder how those words of Paul met you this morning and how they landed in your bodies. I'd love to begin with a little gut check. What were you feeling in your body as you heard the passage? What words and phrases stood out?

Were you braced from the moment I said "Paul?" Ready to find something offensive because let's face it Paul can say some pretty offensive things? Depending on your social location, did you find yourself tightening when you heard the phrase "regard others as better than yourselves?" Or that Jesus had "taken the form of a slave" and "became obedient to death"? Did you cringe on the inside when he said, "every tongue should confess Jesus Christ as Lord?" Clearly, there's a lot here and a lot it may raise in us especially given how some of Paul's words have been used across history to subjugate women, Blacks, gays, people of other religions.

Or was your initial response more positive? Did you find your body softening some at the tenderness of Paul's care and his earnest appeals to imitate Christ's example of humility and service, so that all may live in full accord? I wonder if any felt a sense of warmth or picked up the confidence that Paul seems to have in this community. His words: 'if there is any encouragement, consolation, shared spirit, or compassion' seem almost an affirmation that they already have some of what it takes! If you have those things, and I know you do, then what will help bring that accord to whatever divided community is the practice of humility -- the very humility of Christ -- so that you be of the same mind and same love and so that you may live again in accord with one another.

Or, did you find yourself unable to shake the headlines? Maybe the reading tapped into a sadness or sinking sense of dread that we are living through a moment of profound political discord and polarization. For the time being at least, it can feel like there's very little hope of our being of the same mind or in full accord with those who don't share our views. Sure, there may have been tension and division in that First Church in Philippi that was seeking to address but that's nothing compared to what we are seeing now, and on a national and even global scale! The lines about selfish ambition and conceit alone may have been enough to quicken our pulses with anger at some of our politicians or just the person ahead of you in the checkout line who provocatively wears his mask, on his neck, just because he can.

I'll say when I read it, and granted, I read it a few times, I found myself experiencing all of the above. My body bracing when Paul mentions obedience and putting others interests above our own, the feeling of wanting protection from too much denigration of self or too much uncritical following. I also noticed that softening warmth and tenderness and a spur of curiosity when Paul talks about letting the mind and love of Christ be in us. And when he says at the end "that God is at work in us, enabling us" ... I thought ah, maybe that's what he means by the idea of Christ emptying himself so as to make more room for God's love. What if I too could learn albeit slowly over time to empty myself of myself? What a relief that would be! Getting my ego, my striving, my need for recognition, getting all of my false selves out of the way, so that I can more clearly see God and Christ at can work in me, and in others, maybe even that dude at the check-out counter.

Whatever this may have brought up for us, I invite us to sit with our reactions, honor them and see where they might lead us! This is not going to be one of the sermons I plan on tying off with a bow. In fact, my opening it up to such a wide breadth of response is intended in part as an invitation to practice humility, that is, to practice setting aside our ambitions and our assumptions and consider how someone different from us, with different backgrounds and experiences might see things. This work of humbling,

of decentering ourselves, of consciously slowing down our reactions, poised as we are to like or dislike with a click, may be part of what Paul is after here. Find that compassion, consolation, encouragement and sympathy, that most generous of readings, and start from there. Maybe we can't be of the same mind across a wide range of reactions to this reading, or to this moment, but can we at least try on the same shoes for a moment? *Can* we imagine God at work in the guy at the checkout line, having patience and compassion for his fear of change or his weariness of having someone else boss him around and tell him what do? Can we see somewhere in him and us that same mind and same love of Christ, no matter how hidden or guarded? An irony of this letter, one of Paul's last and one that scholars suggest is his most joyful and caring in its language, is that he wrote it from jail! From that guarded cell, it seems he was able to let his own guard down!

I read a poem last Sunday night that has been haunting me all week. I shared it with some of you this week on a Zoom chat. It's by Claudia Rankine from her new book entitled *Just Us*, a not so subtle pun "Justice." She starts the book with it:

*"What does it mean to want
an age-old call
for change
not to change*

*and yet, also,
to feel bullied
by the call to change?*

*How is a call to change named shame?
named penance, named chastisement?*

How does one say

what if

without reproach? The root

*Of chastise is to make pure.
The impossibility of that[?] — is that
what repels and not*

the call for change?

How *does* one say "what if" without reproach? What if things *could* be different *without* my making you feel badly about the way things are? What if at a spiritual level we could agree on just a few things?

On the way down to Memphis for our civil rights pilgrimage we saw a t-shirt in a store that said, "God and Guns!" What if instead of our knee-jerk "that's the dumbest t-shirt I've ever seen reaction, we could say to whoever produced that or whoever buys it, hey, "I'm not sure I get the Guns part but what if? What if we are both in our own ways looking for protection? What if this is just us talking here? Can we be of the same mind on that much at least? With the psalmist, we are all looking from some

protection, aren't we? Protect us, oh God, from the enemy outsiders of us and our own worst enemies within! What if, indeed?

I came across a concrete illustration that happens to be about black female poets like Rankine. I need to take us back to 1974 and to a ceremony of the National Book Award for Poetry. The finalists that year included Alan Ginzberg, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich and Alice Walker. Rich and Ginzberg were both announced as winners. This kind of split award was not uncommon at the time. However, in a move that stunned the literary community, Rich refused to accept her award for herself. Instead, she shared a statement that she had co-authored with Lorde and Walker. They agreed in advance that if any of them had won, that person would read the statement as a joint acceptance speech. Here's what they wrote, and Rich read.

“We, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Alice Walker, together accept this award in the name of all the women whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world, and in the name of those who, like us, have been tolerated as token women in this culture, often at great cost and in great pain. We believe that we can enrich ourselves more in supporting and giving to each other than by competing against each other; and that poetry—if it is poetry—exists in a realm beyond ranking and comparison. We symbolically join together here in refusing the terms of patriarchal competition and declaring that we will share this prize among us, to be used as best we can for women.... We dedicate this occasion to the struggle for self-determination of all women, of every color, identification, or derived class: the poet, the housewife, the lesbian, the mathematician, the mother, the dishwasher, the pregnant teen-ager, the teacher, the grandmother, the prostitute, the philosopher, the waitress, the women who will understand what we are doing here and those who will not understand yet; the silent women whose voices have been denied us, the articulate women who have given us strength to do our work.”

Can we get an amen for Sisters Audre, Adrienne and Alice, and Sister Claudia too, while we are at it? Amen! At the heart of this profound gesture lies a powerful example of the virtues about which Paul wrote some 2000 years before, of how genuine humility can nurture unity while respecting diversity and self-determination for all! Clearly, they had their eyes on a larger prize than a prestigious award. Their act of resistance was poetry in motion and allowed these women to set aside their own ambitions and needs for recognition in the service of others. What if? What if we too can believe that we can enrich ourselves by supporting and giving to each other rather than being locked into competition, polarization, and our deep-seated instincts for protection, however differently they present? What if we too could set our eyes on a prize larger than this monumentally looming election? What if we can in the coming weeks fight like hell to save our democracy *and* do so from a posture of self-emptying humility? What if we can pour out our sins of smugness, self-righteousness, aghastness, anger and chastising judgment in order to regard “them” at least as highly as we regard ourselves, so that “us” and “them” can become “just us”? I know this is asking a lot. Obedience to the point of death? Maybe not that much, but I am asking us to let God help us metabolize our legitimate hurts and fears and anger and to look at changing ourselves so that we can all the more change the world!

Rankine ends her poem this way...

What if what I want from you is new, newly made

A new sentence in response to all my questions,

A swerve in our relation the words that carry us,

The care that carries. I am here, without the shrug,

Attempting to understand how what I want

And what I want from you run parallel --

Justice and the openings for just us!

As we head into these coming weeks that are sure to be fraught with bitter acrimony and division, we are all wanting something new and our country is literally dying for the kind of humility and coming together about which Paul writes. May we each do our parts and let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, the same love, the same humility, the same hope for justice, the same hope for just us! Amen.



