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Philippians 2: 1-11

Joy in Humility

To my colleagues, my friends, members of our sister churches, elders, presbytery staff, it's an honor to be among you today. Thank you to Moderator Rev. Bob Bronkema for inviting me to deliver the sermon at this gathering and to Rev. Matt Randolph for offering me an opportunity to preach from this pulpit. I appreciate the opportunity.

To many of us, these are deeply beloved verses from Paul's letter to the Philippians. As many of you know, Philippians is one of Paul's most joyful letters, which is remarkable considering he writes it from prison. And in these verses, Paul teaches the church how to live together in Christ through two deeply countercultural virtues/values: unity and humility.

Now if we're honest, those two values feel increasingly countercultural these days. Unity is rare. Humility is rarer still. They don't trend. They don't dominate headlines. What tends to rise to the surface in our culture these days is division, self-promotion, and competition. So, while I believe unity is important, I want to focus my time on humility. I believe the question before us in relation to this text is: can we embrace the way of humility—and trust that it is the path to true joy?

Let me begin with a simple story. A newly promoted military officer was ecstatic to discover he had finally been given his own private office. On his first day, he sat behind his desk, admiring his bookshelves, his nameplate, and especially his brand-new telephone. As he looked out the window, he saw a private walking toward his office. Immediately, he picked up the phone, leaned back, and said loudly, "That's right, Mr. President, I couldn't agree with you more… I'll call the joint chiefs and get their input on our strategy.' He slammed the phone down, turned to the private, and said with authority, "Yes? What do you need?" The private nervously replied, "I'm sorry to disturb you, sir. I was sent by maintenance… to connect your telephone."

We laugh at that story because we recognize how easily authority can be confused with self-importance—and how quickly pride can distort reality and interfere with healthy relationships. That is precisely why Paul calls the church to humility. Because humility is not optional for the Christian life; it is essential architecture for Christian community. You cannot sustain a unified community without a shared commitment to putting others ahead of self. He is calling the Philippians—and us—out of self-absorbed lives and into Spirit-shaped lives. Lives no longer orbiting around personal ambition, self-protection, or self-promotion, but oriented toward the good of others for the glory of Christ.

We should be careful here, because "putting others first" has sometimes been misused in harmful ways—especially against vulnerable people. Paul is not calling for silent submission to abuse or unchecked authority. He is calling for humble obedience to God. And to show us what that looks like, Paul points us not to a principle, but to a person: Jesus.

Verses 6–11 are widely understood as an early Christian hymn. And what this hymn does is not just describe Christ, it confesses Christ. It forms the shared imagination of the church. It tells us who Jesus is, what he has done, and what that means for us. This hymn essentially becomes an anchor for the church's identity.

Farmers on the prairie would sometimes stretch a rope between the house and the barn before winter storms. Because in a blizzard, even familiar ground could become deadly. The rope became their lifeline home. That is what this Christ hymn is for the church. In a world full of competing versions of power and greatness, this hymn pulls us back to Christ.

And the reality this hymn reveals stands as a counter-narrative to our culture's obsession with upward mobility—our constant clamoring for status, power, prestige, and success. It turns that upward mobility on it's head and lifts up downward mobility. Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not cling to his divinity, but emptied himself. He took the form of a servant. He entered not

power but vulnerability. Not dominance but solidarity. Not self-exaltation but self-giving love.

And the word Paul uses here for "humble" and "emptied himself" is not about personality traits like modesty or quietness. It is something deeper. It describes the voluntary movement of Christ into full solidarity with the lowly and the humiliated. As commentator Stanley Saunders observes, Christ fully identifies himself with those on the lowest rungs of the human ladder[1].

In other words, Jesus does not observe human suffering from a distance. He enters it. He inhabits it. He takes it upon himself. When Christ is born in a manger, when he walks among the poor, when he touches the unclean, when he suffers rejection, and ultimately when he is crucified—this is not an accident. It is the revelation of God's very character. This is what Paul means by humility. It is not erasing oneself for the sake of human approval. It is self-giving obedience to the Father for the sake of love. And this is the paradox at the heart of the Christian life: joy is not found in lifting ourselves up, but in laying ourselves down. Paul can rejoice in prison because his life and purpose is anchored in Christ.

There was a powerful moment in a *60 Minutes* interview with Or Levy, who was taken hostage during the October 7, 2023 attacks in Israel. While in captivity,

[1] Stanley Saunders, *Philippians and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 18.

he met another hostage, Hersh Goldberg-Polin, who was severely wounded. And yet Levy said something remarkable: Hersh still carried joy. Even in suffering, he smiled. And he kept repeating a phrase that became their shared strength: *"He who has a why can bear any how."* That phrase became a lifeline. A reminder that meaning can hold people together even in the darkest places. After Levy was released, he had those words tattooed on his arm. And when his young son asked what it meant, since he could not read English, Levy told him: "Your name." In other words—*you, my son, are my why.*

There is something deeply human in that story. The power of a love that endures suffering because it is anchored in someone beyond the suffering. And in a far greater way, that is what we see in Christ. Jesus empties himself. He enters suffering. He embraces the cross. Not because he must, but because he wills to remain faithful to the Father—and to us. His "why" is love, obedience, and his saving purpose.

But the story does not end in humiliation. God exalts him. The crucified Christ is raised and given the name above every name. And in that exaltation, we discover this: God's power is not revealed in domination, but in self-giving love. This is the upside-down kingdom: salvation comes not through upward mobility, but through downward mobility. Jesus saves us not by moving himself up the

ladder of worldly success but down the ladder to be with those who cannot help themselves, those who cannot save themselves.

And this way of humility exposes all the false "Caesars" of the world— it tears the mask off all those systems and voices that demand loyalty through power, fear, ego, or control. They promise life, but they cannot give it. They claim authority, yet they stand morally bankrupt, unworthy of the obedience they crave. They thirst for praise, yet they are nothing but hollow idols that shatter under their weight of the glory of our God. Do not be deceived by their lust for power, their empty threats, or their sanctimonious gestures. Their power is fragile. Their promises cannot save. Their reign is temporary.

And so Paul concludes: one day every knee will bow—not to tyranny, not to empire, not to ego—but to Jesus Christ. The crucified and risen Lord who is the only one worthy of all worship, all allegiance, and all praise. Until that day, we do not answer to fake rulers, false idols, and counterfeit thrones. We answer to a savior that bends down to touch lepers, kneels to wash feet, bears the scars of injustice, descends into the depths and lays himself down in love.

Christian knees don't bend to tyrants, Christian knees bend to Jesus, who is the ultimate authority, the true and rightful King—who has that authority not because he has won it, stole it, manufactured it, or grabbed it but because it was

given, bestowed by the Father who has exalted him above all. Our calling is to reject the temptation of self-importance and instead follow the path of Jesus. And that is the strange joy at the heart of the gospel: we do not find life by exalting ourselves, but by following Jesus on the downward path of humility. The world tells us to climb higher, protect ourselves, and make our names great. But Christ shows us a better way.

He emptied himself for your sake. He went to the cross out of love for the world—and your name is written on the arms of that love. So may we let go of self-importance, take hold of Christ, and discover there the deep joy of belonging to him. Amen.