

“Love Born in Humility”

Illustration: Last week we began by imagining that we were eavesdropping on a conversation taking place in the heavenlies among our triune God. What we heard was a discussion about the brokenness in the world—the suffering and pain, injustice and idolatry that seemed all around—and the inability or unwillingness of the peoples of the world to treat each other very well. But instead of abandoning the world, God made the decision to come into the world and rescue it. It’s what we celebrate at Christmas.

Now, this rescue certainly includes the forgiveness of our sin. But Jesus also came, we will consider this morning, to model for the world the nature and character of true love. It is a love that is born in humility, a love that puts the interests of others ahead of our own. In his letter to the church in Philippi, we will hear the apostle Paul draw the attention of his readers to this love because it seems that, due to the various trials they were facing, their love for one another, and for others, had begun to wane. Grumbling and arguing, divisiveness and selfishness, were on the rise.

Might that sound a bit familiar? Have the various trials brought about by living nearly two years in a pandemic caused your ability to love to suffer? We all, I think, have this low level of anxiety and uncertainty that we carry with us that can break out against others in unexpected and troubling ways. Could we, like the Philippian church, use a bit of a tune up as we think about love? Let’s hear how Paul seeks to help these early Christians, and then consider how that might be a help to us as well. [READ]

I. The Humility of Jesus

A. Let’s begin with the second half of our reading, with Jesus, the one who Paul holds up as our model for love. Paul seems to be drawing here on a very early statement (poem or hymn?) on who Jesus is and what he came to do. It speaks of his birth and life – “being made in human likeness,” his death – “becoming obedient to death on a cross,” and his exaltation, which followed his resurrection and ascension – “every knee should bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

B. What I want to highlight is the humility that moves throughout this description and that was necessary for Jesus to undertake this mission. It was a humility that called for him, the Lord of heaven and earth, to take on the nature of a servant, and then to die a humiliating death, for our sake. As we think about this, one way to look at it is as an “utterly incomprehensible paradox” (Wesley Hill). How does God leave his glory behind and take on the inglorious role of a servant who winds up being put to death? Alternatively, and I think this is what the poem seeks to communicate, we can look at God’s glory and humility as of the same piece. That is, the incarnation, taking on the nature of a servant who looks to the interests of others before his own, even to the point of giving up his life for them, doesn’t give up the glory of God but actually reveals it. Self-giving love, love born in humility, is the character of God, is the very heart of God. This is what God is like, from top to bottom, from heaven to earth.

C. I appreciate how Michael Distefano, Director for Faith and Justice for Amira, described the character of God during Amira’s Voices of Hope presentation a few months ago. He noted that in ancient cultures, a god would identify himself with the powerful and cultural elite. But not the God whose name is the LORD. This God, as Psalm 146 describes him, upholds the cause of the oppressed, the hungry, and the prisoner, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. This God humbly identifies himself with the most marginal folks in society, and even moves toward them in love.

D. A couple of weeks ago I mentioned that in Nazareth, where Mary grew up, there is a church called the Basilica of the Annunciation. It is built upon the place where some think Mary's childhood home was, and so also the place where the angel Gabriel appeared to her and announced all of the amazing things that were going to happen to her, and through her.

There is another church that is found in Bethlehem, where Mary gave birth to Jesus. It's called the Church of the Nativity. It's built, some think, upon the spot where Jesus was born. I had the privilege of being there on a Christmas Eve some 40 years ago. Over the years there is a lot that has become fuzzy about that trip (!), but one thing that has stayed lodged in my mind is the church's main entrance, which shows stages of development over the centuries (6th c. to 14th c.). Basically, you can see that the doorway was made smaller and smaller, until the entrance became only a little rectangle about four feet high. Originally, the reason for this was to make looting more difficult. What it causes you to do, however, is to bow or even kneel in order to enter the church (and the stones that comprise the threshold are incredibly smooth from all the knees that have touched them over the centuries).

And the door has taken on a name – The Door of Humility – which is perfect! For, as you enter the building on your knees it causes you to consider a three-fold humility.

1. First, there is the humility that is called for in order to be in God's presence and receive his mercy. Humility, as one writer puts it, is the gateway to faith. Without it we simply rely on our own efforts without recognizing our dependence on God, and without it we rely simply on our own reason, closing ourselves off from the miraculous.
2. Second, given its location in Bethlehem, going through this door of humility gets you thinking of the humility that the second person of the trinity revealed as a fundamental part of his character in his willingness to be born as one of us. We could even say that the womb of Mary was the door of humility for Jesus as he entered the world as a vulnerable infant.
3. Third, it can move us to consider the humility that is called for in our own lives as we seek to follow Jesus and live a truly human life, a new self, as Paul puts it to the Colossian congregation, that is being renewed into the image of God (Col. 3:10) to take on more and more of the character of this God, including and especially his humility.

II. The Humility of His Followers

A. That is where Paul is ultimately going with this description of the humble character of Jesus. "You want to know what it looks like to live a truly Christian life?" asks Paul. "Then look to Jesus and the humility of his life and how he put the needs of others, including your own, above his." "Love begins," it has been said, "when someone else's needs are more important than my own." What would the world look like if the sacrificial love that is offered to us began to flow through us? What would our families, our workplaces, our churches look like? How might that be a way for us to bring some much-needed light into the darkness?

B. I've mentioned to some of you that the verse I've been clinging to during this advent season, particularly as I've watched our advent wreath grow brighter each Sunday, is John 1:5, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." I think this promise has stuck in my heart because there seems to be more darkness in the world than I can ever remember and this word reminds me that the darkness, no matter how pervasive, will not have the last word. As I've continued to reflect

on this promise, what God also began to bring to mind is that Jesus, who said “I am the light of the world” (Jn. 8:12), also calls us to be so. As he put it in his Sermon on the Mount:

You are the light of the world. . . Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Ma. 5:14-16)

C. This truth was communicated to me in a rather unique way early last Sunday morning. I was sitting in the back pew, as I often do, praying for our time of worship and all that would be happening on that day. It was rather gloomy out and sort of dim in here as I hadn't turned the lights on. And given some of what I had experienced in the past week, the darkness seemed to be encroaching. But then I looked up and noticed that the sun had broken out and was streaming through the middle window. And what was striking was that it was just a narrow band of light which was only shining on Mary, Joseph and the baby in our manger scene, and on the cross that hangs from the pulpit above it. Call it a “Zechariah in the temple moment!” It was if God was saying to me: “Yes, this is the way, the way of my Son, the way of humility, the way of the cross, the way of self-giving love. Keep walking in it because this is the way he brought light into the world, and to you, and this is the way I am calling you and his followers to keep on bringing such light to others.”

Where do you sense your love for others has begun to wane? Where has grumbling and arguing and selfishness begun to take its place? Where might your understanding of a love that is born of humility be in need a bit of a tune up? Go to Jesus. Ask him to show you the depth of his love for you. Then ask him to show you how he'd like you to shine that love into the life of another.