

The Reverend Tuesday Rupp
Sermon of September 27, 2020
Philippians 2 Matt 21 Proper 21 A 2020

This morning's reading centers one of the most beloved songs in all of the New Testament, the Kenosis Hymn in Philippians chapter 2. Kenosis means "self-emptying." Jesus had to empty himself completely, to set aside his ego and move through his fear, to fully participate in God's love:

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

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.

In other words, God called, and Jesus showed up.

I find that it is easy to lose touch with what this really means in a flesh and blood kind of way, especially these days. Right now I might actually trade a year of my life to be able to safely attend a normal barbecue or baptism or birthday party, to the bedside of a loved one in hospital, to be able to show up physically for my friends and loved ones. Our current situation of social distancing is compounded by a kind of religious distancing.

The way we talk about Jesus, the way we talk *to* Jesus, makes it easy to put him, and his life and his work, at a remove. It's the problem of Sainthood - We elevate someone who had life circumstances every bit as difficult as our own, make them into some kind of magical person, and then breathe a bit easier, trusting that some other saint in some other place will come and take care of things for us. We tell ourselves that their life choices were easier somehow. They were saints. We are mortals. And that's that.

But what if that isn't that? What if we ponder Jesus, not as the risen Christ, the guy from the Stained Glass windows and the elegantly written prayers, But as the actual person who lived and died in a specific place at a specific time. What if we consider that the time and place where Jesus was born, raised, worked, and then answered God's call on his life was one where racial and economic oppression by a dominant empire was the norm?

He grew up poor, as part of the lowest caste. When he was brought to the Temple, his parents could only afford the most inexpensive sacrifice of two doves. Jesus was part of what the great theologian Howard Thurman described as "the Disinherited," the ones in every age who are excluded from access to power and any kind of accumulated wealth. The ones who live under the whims of their privileged higher-caste neighbors.

For Jesus to describe a love for all neighbors, even a love for enemies, did not mean some kind of cheap, easy, sentimental love. He was describing a love for the very people who would beat him as soon as look at him, a love for people who would turn over information about his doings and sayings for the sole purpose of getting him killed. That kind of love.

When Jesus addresses the Temple in Matthew 21, he was entering a place where chief priests - the inheritors of privilege who were interested in maintaining the social and economic status quo - and the elders - the ones who resented deeply the Roman presence in their midst, who resented being in the disinherited caste but did nothing to upset the poisoned apple cart because of the very real fear of violent reprisal - when Jesus entered that temple, he was showing up with his whole self, his vulnerable self.

How it must have stung the elders to be called out for harboring their burning resentment, while doing nothing about it. No wonder they question his authority. "Who are you to tell me what to do, Jesus of Nazareth? You don't know my life. You don't know what I would risk - my family, my business, my friendships, to show up the way you are suggesting." And what about the good works they were already doing? I'm certain that the elders and chief priests participated in doing kind things in their communities. They followed Mosaic law after all, participated in providing for the poor in all the ways described in the books of Leviticus and Numbers. But setting aside their own higher caste? Showing up with their whole selves for true equality, true egalitarianism? And as we so often do when we are called out for being a good person who does nothing, they did their best to discredit him, to call Jesus' message "fake news."

So Jesus gives them a choice, what educators often call giving them an "out." If you checked "No" on the Facebook invite to show up for Justice for those who have been historically, systematically, and violently oppressed, it's ok. Like that first brother, the one who said that he was too busy, and not interested in helping tend the God's vineyard, the one where the fruit of justice and mercy are tended, like that first brother who said to his Father, "I'm already doing enough, I don't really like crowds, and besides I've got too much going on anyway," like that first brother, the higher-caste inheritors of privilege in the Empire can change their minds, Tina-turner themselves around, and show up anyway.

But what if they didn't want to show up? What if they, like the younger brother, gave a polite "Oh, I'll be there, Dad, To help you out," And then didn't? Now, there are a hundred reasons, a hundred excuses they could have used, for not showing up in the way God asked. I'm sure all were very reasonable, and very valid. What if, like the second brother, they don't really feel the importance of bringing their whole selves out to cultivate justice; they don't feel the burning necessity of risking their position in the community, or even their personal safety to do the work God has asked them to do, and then decided at the last minute to send a text saying, "Sorry, but I just can't," tacking on some excuse? What happens if we only pay lip service doing the work we are called to do, sing the hymns and pray the prayers and go about our lives like that second brother, telling ourselves that it's ok, we don't really need to do anything else, the problems of justice are for those lower-caste people to solve for themselves? Well, then, so what?

Jesus thought of that too. Consider this, he says: Those tax collectors, the ones who benefit economically from their collusion with the Roman Empire, and the sex workers, the ones who are so often publicly reviled and privately visited, these folks that you despise have been moved to the front of the line. They are ahead in line because they heard the word proclaimed by John, they received God' invitation to help tend the vineyard, and showed up. And if they still felt any qualms about it, experienced a moment of shame, felt a little too "seen" in this parable, well, it's easy to skip over the work of self-examination and

repentance, to instead nurse our resentments, to stoke the fire of anger until that same resentment is forged into a weapon of self-righteousness. It's easy to turn the *I-Feel-Bad* into *The-person-who-pointed-out-my-error-is-bad*. From there, it's just a hop, skip, and a jump to violence. Just ask those chief priests and elders. They nursed that rage against those Roman Centurions, against those tax collectors, against anyone above who made their lives harder, and redirected that anger below and redirected it at the guy who invited them to give up their part in this caste system and participate in God's mission. Instead of being part of God's vision, they turned into the very people they professed to despise, choosing to collude with the same empire that oppressed them. They took that anger, collaborated with the enemy, and had Jesus killed.

The thing is, Jesus didn't enter that temple puffed up with self-righteousness. Who in their right mind would do such a thing? In full control of his mind, he showed up anyway. Jesus put his very life on the line - to say nothing of the lives of his friends - to challenge the status quo, to stand up for the disinherited and lowest caste, to give his audience - then and now - the opportunity, the "out" to answer God's call with our whole selves: Mind, Soul, and Body.

Friends, it is hard out there. I know it is. Like you, I am ready for this thing that I cannot control to be over. Many of us are running on fumes and even those are starting to sputter. Attempting to balance, say, shepherding your children through hybrid learning while working from home and attempting communicate with a spouse who is also working from home but has somehow become harder to reach, all while assisting a parent who has become newly vulnerable to a pandemic, to say nothing of the growing pandemic of overt racism, in the middle of an economic recession and the most toxic election cycle in memory, all of which is causing so much stress and anxiety that we are losing both sleep and hair: I know that all of us are beyond hurting.

And it feels like a cruel irony that in the midst of all this challenge, that our Gospel text asks us to be part of one more thing. The Good News is that we are not going it alone. The Good News is that we as a community of followers of Jesus have each other to lean on. We have different gifts and charisms that we can share to help lighten the load. The Good News is that our whole lives of prayer and fellowship, of Bible Studies and Retreats, have been preparation and training for this very moment. As Esther's uncle Mordecai says to his niece, "Who knows? Perhaps you were born for such a time as this?"

Jesus promised his followers many things - joy beyond measure, peace that passes understanding, life that destroys death. Jesus promised that we would never be alone - and he is here, even now. If you look around you will see him in each other's faces, you can feel him in this sacramental body here assembled. Jesus promised us many things, but he never promised that it would be easy. And yet. For those of us who have felt even a taste of what it is to be part of the Disinherited, And then to experience the joy, the life-giving health, and the real love of adoption as children of God, we know that the only way to share that love is to show up for our neighbors.

I leave you this morning with this blessing for that other community in long-ago and far-away Philippi, a community also doing its best to follow in the footsteps of salvation:

If then there is any encouragement
in Christ, any consolation from love,
any sharing in the Spirit,
any compassion and sympathy,

make my joy complete:
be of the same mind,
having the same love,
being in full accord and of one mind.
Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,
but in humility regard others as
better than yourselves.
Let each of you look
not to your own interests,
but to the interests of others.
Let the same mind be in you that was in
Christ Jesus,

May it be true for you and for me. In the name of God. Amen.