

## Measure By Measure

<sup>1</sup>If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, <sup>2</sup>make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord (united in soul) and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup>Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, <sup>8</sup> he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross. <sup>9</sup> Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. <sup>12</sup>Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; <sup>13</sup>for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

~ Philippians 2:1-13

Caroline and I went for a walk last night and a young man in a pickup truck pulled into a driveway several houses in front of us. As we approached the idling truck, we could hear a popular country song blaring in the cab, but something wasn't right. The voice singing the popular tune didn't belong to anyone you'd know. It was amateurish, loud, ridiculously out of tune. A young man was singing at the top of his lungs, completely unaware of the couple passing by. He stopped when he saw us in the rearview mirror, but once we were two driveways down the road he started up again as if he'd never let up.

I'm not a professional musician, but I know a few things about singing. I know, for instance, that you can't be embarrassed to sing. If you sing timidly you'll most certainly sing off key; if you sing sheepishly, you'll surely be flat. If you fail to aim for the top of the high notes, you're going to miss the mark.

Music must be sung with gusto! You have to open the bellows, sing from the gut, and fill the rafters with your voice. You've got to unleash your heart and let it mingle with the melody, set the whole of your soul sailing on song. You can only make a joyful noise, when you sing completely with all your heart, and all your soul, with all you mind, with all your strength.

I start with music this morning because our text starts with music. In many Biblical translations, verses six through eleven are set out in verse, poetically, like you'd expect to see in the book of Psalms. It is probable that these rhythmic, poetic words are the words of an early Christian hymn. In fact, the hymn may have been sung or recited during baptisms. Read the poem and you can practically see a young convert, a catechumen, standing waist deep in a cool pool descending with Christ into the darkness of death and ascending with Christ to life anew, proclaiming the earliest Christian confession: "Jesus Christ is Lord!"

This sweeping movement, descent and ascent, brought low and raised up, is foundational to the Christian story. You'll recall Jacob had a dream in which angels descended and ascended a stairway to heaven. Of course there's Jonah, who is cast from the side of a ship, literally sinks into the sea until he is swallowed by a great fish and spat up to pursue a new vocation. In the Gospels, you'll remember Lazarus. Lazarus died and was put into the ground, literally under the earth, before Jesus arrived on the fourth day and said, "Lazarus, get up!"

As Paul reminds us today, this is the very shape of the life of Jesus. Descent and Ascent. “Though he was in the form of God”, the hymn begins, “Christ did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited” Lower! “being born in human likeness, being found in human form” Lower! “taking the form of a slave” Lower! “obedient to the point of death” Lower! “even death on a cross”. A criminal’s death on an executioner’s tool.

Karl Barth describes the importance of Christ’s descent beautifully: “Jesus Christ [became] the brother of humankind, threatened with humankind, harassed and assaulted with humankind, with humankind in the stream which hurries downwards to the abyss, hastening with humankind to death, to the cessation of being and nothingness. With humankind Christ cries – knowing far better than any other how much reason there is to cry: ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’”

There is no depth the presence and power of God has not plumbed. You can never get so low that you fall beyond the bounds of God’s grace and love.

This hymn is more than an explanation of Jesus and his work in the world. It is the ethical paradigm for our work in the world. “Let the same mind be in you,” exhorts Paul, which is really to say, “live like this!!”

Just like Jesus traded equality with God for the complete and mundane limitations of being human, so we must be willing to trade in our sense of privileged autonomy for a full and dynamic experience of the other. We are not our own; this is a central Christian conviction. We belong to God. We belong to one another.

Living a Christian ethic, doing what is good in the sight of the Lord, begins when we try to fully immerse ourselves in the experience of the other, when we pour out our own interests and shed our own perspective to experience life through the eyes of another.

My little sister Kimberlee and I were on a family vacation when we were maybe four and six years old. We were walking around a touristy gift shop, wandering through aisles and aisles of trinkets, junk really, kitschy beach stuff. I saw my sister pick up a little necklace with a tiny glass jar of perfume dangling from it.

In the next moment, there was broken glass on the floor and a puddle of perfume seeping across the tile. An attendant rushed over, Kimberlee was in tears. I knew she would have to pay for it. We had little plastic purses, pinch the sides and the purse would pucker open. It was going to take every nickel and dime she could carry in that little purse.

I still remember my brotherly thoughts: It was an accident, she’s innocent, you can’t hold her responsible, it’s only a dollar and she’s just a kid. That moment marked the end of innocence for both of us; we discovered consequences, experienced guilt, shame and embarrassment. She’s my little sister and I was right there watching her pick up the bottle. I may as well have been Adam watching Eve take that first bite. I’m her brother, that’s my shame, my embarrassment. Let it be my dollar, she’s just a little kid. I’ll clean it up, but first let me wipe her tears.

We are called to share our lives with one another, to live in radical unity with our neighbors.

But the parents of young children reminded me on Sunday that they encounter people every day who make this calling a bitter struggle. Not everyone is your little sister. If you haven’t been out lately, there are unpleasant people in the world. You can imagine who I’m talking about, we recognize them right away.

They are people who need to CHANGE. You need to change your attitude. You need to change your priorities. You need to be a little bit more patient. You need to work harder and show some self-respect. You need to change!!

But that's the thing about following Jesus. We descend with him. We meet people where they are, not where we want them to be. We put our expectations aside, and embrace others for who they are in this moment. The ethic of Jesus is about loving people here, not getting them there.

There's a well of grace beneath the surface of our expectations. So how do we share the mind of Christ, especially when it's difficult?

The author of Philippians knows that music not only carries the content of our ethic, but music conforms our lives to that ethic as well; by singing, our lives are shaped. Try it. The next time you encounter someone who makes it impossible for you to love them like a child of God. Hum a favorite hymn. Sing a familiar Christian song.

Melodious breath is an old and ancient power. It was the primordial ru'ah, the breath of God that hovered over the waters and spoke creation into being. It was the "breath of life" that surged through nostrils of clay, and animated Adam. Moving breath expressed in song has creative and formative power.

If the form of Christ is to be formed in us, we need to sing and sing with gusto! Note by note, like a young man in a Chevy truck. We need to open the bellows of our lungs, breathe deep, and sing from the depths. Measure by measure, we must fill the rafters with a joyful noise, unleash our hearts and let them mingle with the melody, set the whole of our soul sailing on song. We need to sing like our life is formed by it, because really, it is.