

“The Limits of Love”

Philippians 2:1-11

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Communion Devotion

This morning our attention is drawn to one of the most ambitious challenges Paul issued to anyone. You will find it in Paul’s letter to the Philippians which Paul wrote while he was imprisoned in Rome.

“Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus,” he wrote to his dear friends in Philippi. “Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and becoming like human beings. When he found himself in the form of a human, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross.” (Philippians 2:5-8)

Why did Paul issue this challenge to the Philippians? First of all, he loved them dearly and wanted the best for them. Paul believed that thinking and living like Christ would bring the best out in his readers as well as the people around them.

Paul also wanted the Philippians to adopt the attitude or mind of Christ to resolve a problem in the church at Philippi. It appears there was a power struggle between two leaders which was creating tension and undermining the work needing to be done.

Paul appealed to these leaders and all the church members to cooperate with one another in a spirit of love. He wanted each person to keep his or her eyes focused on the work God had called them to do, not their personal agendas.

Paul admonished the Philippians to settle their differences so their energy and efforts could be directed toward serving their community, not fighting battles within their fellowship. Listen to the advice Paul gave them.

“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.”

How could they do this? Paul told them they could accomplish this by thinking like Jesus and adopting the mind of Christ.

What was the mind of Christ? According to Paul, it was the mind of a servant who gave himself away in service to God and others.

When I read Paul's description of Jesus in this beloved hymn, I am struck by our Lord's humility, modesty, love and loyalty. Most of all, however, I am amazed at the sacrifices Jesus made to honor God and serve others.

Jesus gave up so much by letting go of everything we consider necessary for health and happiness. "He emptied himself," Paul wrote, "by taking the form of a slave."

Why did Jesus do this? He did it because God asked him to and we needed him to do it. The wellbeing of the world and the quality of every life on earth depended upon Jesus leaving his heavenly home and becoming one of us. No one has ever sacrificed so much on behalf of others.

What do you need to give up so you can help someone who is struggling? What must you let go of so you can embrace someone who needs your help?

"The deepest level of love always involves sacrifice," George Buttrick reminded us through his many writings. This was certainly true for Jesus, and it is for us, too.

Giving up anything we value is a struggle. This is true whether it is time, money, possessions, dreams, plans, pride or security.

It is not easy to give ourselves away like Jesus did, and he gave away far more than we would ever be called upon to give. Love is willing to do the difficult, though, at least the kind of love Jesus modeled, and we are called to emulate.

I suppose it is human nature to want to put limits on love. After all, we can only give so much...right? Surely, there are reasonable people who will keep us from going beyond that point and save us from radical generosity.

I wonder if Jesus felt this way and had a conversation with God about it. Did he try to negotiate the terms of this mission so it did not include becoming a servant and dying on a cross?

I don't know, but I do recall when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane the night of his betrayal and arrest, he begged God to take away the cup of suffering. Who wouldn't?

Whatever struggle Jesus had with God or himself that night, in the end he gave everything he had to honor God and serve others. He held nothing back. The tray and the cup on this sacred table symbolize his complete sacrifice.

Where would we be had he not done this?

Who needs you to love them this much? Who needs you to love them more than anything you are holding on to today? Who needs you to adopt the mind of Christ?

Conversely, who loves you this much? Who has walked alongside you in your darkest hours and sacrificed so much on your behalf?

Is it time for you to respond to their love with heartfelt gratitude? Is it time to quit putting yourself at the center of everything in your life? Is it time for you to make changes in your life? Is it time for you to adopt the mind of Christ?

Talk to God about this as the tray and cup are passed. This conversation can change your life forever.