

23 December 2018

Love
Philippians 2:4-11

When we read scriptures for Christmas, we don't usually go to the letters of Paul. Today we do. We read from Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 2, verses 4-11. As Linus van Pelt might say, "This is what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown":

*⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
⁶who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

One of the disorders described in the American Psychological Association's diagnostic manual is "Narcissistic Personality Disorder." The name tells you what it is, but what the manual describes is more than just being self-centered. That applies to every human being on the planet, at least part of the time. No, narcissism becomes a *disorder* when it is so extreme as to impair a person's personality, interpersonal interactions, and functioning in society. Here are some of the traits that the diagnostic manual describes: a grandiose sense of self-importance, a need for excessive admiration even when you've done nothing extraordinary, fantasies of personal brilliance or attractiveness, exploitation of others (i.e. treating other people as either enemies to be overcome or tools to be used), and a lack of empathy. Therapists add that this disorder is one of the most difficult to treat, because, although people with this disorder are desperately unhappy, that unhappiness is always someone else's fault. Even more problematic, these narcissists are suspicious of anyone who might help, because they assume other people see the world the same way that they do. Consequently, when people try to help them, they think, "Why do you want to help? What's in it for you? What's your angle?" because that's the only reason *they* would help someone else.

I say all this not to diagnose anyone – really! – but as a way to approach our final reflection on the Advent candle themes of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. One useful method for thinking about something in a new way is to ask, "What is its opposite?" The disordered

personality I just described is the opposite of everything I've been saying the past few weeks. When we looked at hope, I challenged us to think about Christian hope in a deeper way – not just as a hope for some desired outcome for ourselves but rather a hope that rests in the endlessly creative God who may not make everything comfortable, but who will never abandon us. When we talked about peace, I spoke of the peace that passes understanding because it has nothing to do with circumstances and everything to do with the goodness of God. And last week I talked about the joy that is unaffected by personal hardship, because it is centered in the well-being of *other* people. Hope, peace, and joy become deep and genuine and resilient when we think first of others and put their well-being first. Only then can we experience life in all its depth and fullness. As Jesus put it, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it” (Luke 9:24).

This is what Paul wrote so eloquently about in Philippians 2 – *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* (vv. 4-5). And this is what lies behind the miracle we remember at Christmas. Let us simply go through the steps that Paul lists. First, Jesus Christ, who actually *was* superior to all humanity – being God – gave up that superiority. In Paul's words, he *emptied himself*. In so doing, he became human – the creator entering his own creation. Think about what this entailed. One who had been omnipresent – everywhere at once – limited himself to one place at a time. One who had been eternal – that is, *everywhen* at once – was now tied to a specific historical timeline. One who had been spirit, beyond physical description, became flesh – specifically the flesh of a brown-skinned Semitic male, and subjected himself to all the pains and indignities of fleshly existence. Then, Paul points out, he went further. He wasn't even a particularly important human – he was a peon, a slave, a serf, a common laborer. And then, in that form, he was treated as a criminal, even to the point of dying a criminal's excruciating death. This is what we remember at Christmas: not just the specific, humble circumstances of Jesus' birth but the miracle that led to that point – the self-emptying of God for the sake of others. Jesus Christ is the photographic negative of the narcissist, opposite at every point, in every detail. And the name for that self-emptying is the name of our final Advent candle: Love.

There is a promised outcome of this kind of love, but first I have to make one important qualification. As we humans have done with every other good gift of God, we have found ways to corrupt the gift of love, to twist it to our own selfish ends. So let me just say this: the self-emptying that characterizes love must be given freely and intentionally. It can never be given out of fear or duty or compulsion. When someone gives up her or his own self for someone else because that person demands it, that's not love. That's abuse. That's not what Jesus did; nor is it what Christ asks of us.

Paul concludes his poem on the self-emptying of Christ in this way: *Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*. By emptying himself completely, Christ became fulfilled. By giving himself away, he did not become nothing; he became everything. He did not forfeit his own unique personality; he became the most striking individual in history. I'm not sure I can explain how that works, but it happens consistently. Those who most fully give themselves to others become the most strikingly individual personalities. Think St. Francis of Assisi. Think Mother Theresa. Both bowed in humble service to others, and both became giants.

That is our challenge and promise. When we learn to love as Christ loved, following his pattern of self-emptying, we discover a deeper hope, a more unshakeable peace, and a more resilient joy – and we become truly ourselves. I close with the verse from 1 John that we used in today’s call to worship: *God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him* (4:8-9).