

April 5, 2020
Why Such Humiliation?
Palm Sunday, 2020
Sixth in a Series of Seven Sermons, "Questions of Lent"
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Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Dear Christian Friends,

Some of you may remember a CBS television show named Undercover Boss, which aired ten or so years ago. Each episode featured a CEO or a highly placed executive of a company humbling him or herself by changing appearance, assuming an alias, and a fictional life story. The CEO would spend approximately one week undercover, working in a variety of entry level jobs. **Why such humiliation?** The mindset in this case was for the CEO to do two things, 1) to discover and correct the faults of that company, and to reward workers who were doing well.

In these days, millions of Americans are humbling themselves by giving up their constitutional rights, including the freedom to assemble, the freedom to pursue happiness, the freedom to go to work and earn a living, the freedom to worship, and the list goes on, as you well know. **Why such humiliation?** The obvious mindset is to slow down the spread of a nasty virus, to make sure our hospitals and especially our intensive care units are not overwhelmed, Or to say it in five or less words, stay home and save lives.

On a far grander scale, about 2,020 years ago or so, the very Son of God humiliated himself. Lutheran scholars call this the state of humiliation, a very specific period of time beginning with conception and ending with his burial. The very creator of heaven and earth stepped out of eternity to live on earth in real time, we call this the mystery of the incarnation. He lived in our midst as a fertilized egg, then humiliated as an embryo growing into a fetus. The very author of life living as an infant needing to have his soiled diapers changed, later on he would be telling the lame to get up and walk, but now he was a toddler learning how to walk, growing into that neighborhood boy and then a teenager being told what to do and not to do by his parents, then a young man taking on the nature of a servant, learning obedience through suffering, obedient, even death by crucifixion on a cross. **Why such humiliation?** His mindset, as you well know, was to do the will of his father, it was to take our place under the law, it was to get to a little hill outside of Jerusalem, and in the days of Passover, it was to offer up a once and for all sacrifice as payment for the sins of the world. As a result, our sins are forgiven, our souls are redeemed, our eternal destiny is settled.

Our Lenten Sunday sermon series has as its title, "Questions of Lent." Last Sunday we asked the question, "Can dead bones be brought back to life? With the prophet Ezekiel, we saw a vision of the valley of dry bones coming to life. Then, with Mary and Martha and all kinds of prominent citizens of Bethany and Jerusalem, we saw the soon to be crucified Jesus commanding the dead and stinking Lazarus to come on out of his grave. Which is exactly what he did in full view of Pharisees and Sadducees many who rejected the very possibility of the resurrection of the body.

On this Palm Sunday, our sanctuaries and our city streets are as empty as they have ever been, but on that first Palm Sunday, the crowds were doing the opposite of social distancing. The crowd was a mixture of those who had witnessed the resurrection of Lazarus and those who were coming out of Jerusalem to check out to see if it really was true that a dead man was now alive and well. It was a mixture of pilgrims who were believing and crying out for the Messiah to save his people and religious leaders who wanted not only

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for Jesus but also Lazarus to be put to death. It was a mixture of folks with hearts open to what God might be up to and folks with hearts hardened against any change in the status quo.

Today’s question, Why such humiliation? Or to ask it another way, what was the mindset of Christ as He decided not to count equality with God something to be held onto? What is the mindset of the Master of the universe taking on the form of a servant and humbling himself all the way to death on a cross?

There are a lot of ways we could answer that question, but today we’re going to answer it in the context of Paul’s letter to the early Christians in Philippi. You may be surprised to learn that the background of this letter was that two ladies named Euodia and Synteche were quarreling and their quarreling was threatening to destroy the unity of the entire congregation. We don’t know whether the spat was about something petty or major, but we can be sure that there was a fair measure of pride and stubbornness that was at the heart of the division.

In our text for today, Paul is declaring that wherever there is division, the pathway out of that division, the pathway to peace is for those who are divided to **do nothing out of rivalry or conceit but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. It is to look not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others.** Or to say it another way, it is to have the mindset of Christ inside of us. Three truths we learn today about the mindset of Christ and how we are to follow the example of Christ all the way through a period of humiliation leading to an exaltation that is yet to come. Three truths, and a story to go along with each truth.

Truth #1 is to make a decision of renunciation, truth #2 i to live a life of humility, and truth #3 is to receive a gift from above, namely exaltation.

Truth #1 about having the mindset of Christ is a decision of renunciation. It’s hard for Lutherans to hear the word “renunciation” without thinking of the Baptism liturgy where Godparents and parents and congregations pledge to help that little one spend her life renouncing the devil and all of his works and all of his ways. Or to think of the Rite of Confirmation, where freshly scrubbed and white robed 14-year-old pledge to be diligent in the use of the means of grace and spend the rest of their lives renouncing that same devil with all of his nasty works and devious ways. To renounce is to say, “I’m serious about doing battle.”

We can be sure that before the foundations of the world were laid, the Son of God had made a decision to do battle with the forces of darkness. He decided that when the fullness of time had arrived. He would be conceived by the Holy Spirit, He would be born of a woman, He would live under the Law, He would suffer under Pontius Pilate, He would be crucified, He would be dead, and He would be buried. A long long time ago, He had made the decision to not hold onto His equality with God, He in whom the fullness of deity dwelled would empty himself, He would give up the right to his rights.

I didn’t say that the Son of God would give up His rights. He would give up the right to fully use his rights. He didn’t give up his deity, he emptied himself of the full expression of that deity. He poured himself out, like taking a bucket and pouring out its contents, so there was nothing left inside. He poured out every right he had to enjoy life as God.

The kingdom of God is like a married man who pursues peace with his wife by renouncing his desire to be right in favor of maintaining a home life that is pleasant. It’s like a wife who pursues harmony with her husband by deciding again and again to appreciate what he is doing well and praying often for patience. It’s

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like congregations across the nation giving up their right to assemble in submission to the governing authorities. It’s like hard working citizens giving up their right to a paycheck out of concern for their neighbors. It’s like countless Christians in these days staying home and renouncing God-given right like they’ve never renounced before, trusting that God has a plan to bring them through, trusting that the day is coming when all the nations will assemble and every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.

Truth #2 about having the mindset of Christ is to live a life of humility.

We don’t know whether those two women, Euodia and Synteche in Philippi, figured out a way to settle their disagreement. We can only hope that they read Paul’s letter, that they were able to back up and give their situation another look. We can only hope that they were able to look each other in the eyes, to listen to what the other was saying, to admit what they could have done better, and to forgive as they had already been forgiven. We can only hope that from that day forward, they would live in such a way that others would be attracted to their little congregation and not driven away.

We do know exactly how Christ solved the disagreement between God Almighty and the forces of darkness. We know that he went like a lamb to the slaughter, we know that it wasn’t at all about his will but the will of his father, we know that he drank every last drop of a cup overflowing with a righteous God’s wrath, we know that He was able to be tempted in every way that we are and yet without sin, we know that he was able to submit to the governing authorities in a way that would attract all nations to his cross for generations to come, we know that he was able to humble himself in a perfect way day after day before the mighty hand of God, that he could be exalted in due time.

The kingdom of God is like a single mom who is kind and patient with her children even when they are testing her to the limit. It’s like a group of women who spend their days sewing face masks, in response to their Savior getting slapped in the face again and again for them. It’s like medical professionals doing what they are assigned to do, at great risk to themselves, in response to Jesus Christ carrying out his assignment all the way to Calvary. It’s like children being obedient to their parents in response to Jesus being obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

It’s like countless Christians in these days humbling themselves in ways they’ve never humbled before, trusting that God has a plan to work all of this out for the good of those who love him, looking forward to that day when all the nations will be bending their knees, even those for whom it is too late, and confessing that Jesus is who he has always claimed to be.

Truth #3 about having the mindset of Christ is a gift from above, namely exaltation.

For Jesus, exaltation meant descending down into hell and proclaiming victory over the spirits kept in prison, it meant being raised from the dead by His Father on the third day, exaltation meant appearing as risen Savior for 40 days to individuals and to groups of ten or less, as well as to the crowds, it meant ascending into heaven on the 40th day, it meant sending out His Spirit in rich measure on the 50th day, and it means ruling all of heaven and earth in all of these days, and it means coming again in glory along with the angels and the archangels on the last day.

For the congregation of Philippi, exaltation meant hearing that their sins were forgiven, their souls had been saved, and their mansion in heaven was on reserve. Exaltation meant for them what it still means for us today, it means eating and drinking together at our Lord’s Supper, it means enjoying together some day soon a foretaste of heaven, it means together bending our knees and confessing with our lips that God has a

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plan to prosper and heal, confessing that Jesus Christ is still our Savior and Lord, that our father is still in heaven creating and sustaining, and that the Spirit of God is still calling and gathering and enlightening and sanctifying and keeping us in the one true faith.

The kingdom of God is a person who has been keeping God at a distance. His Father in heaven has been listening, but there hasn't been much praying. His Savior has been gently knocking at the door, but he has been ignoring. The Spirit has been teaching but he hasn't been very interested. These days, however, if you listen closely, you can hear this man doing a bit more praying, and six feet away there's a woman doing a bit more listening, and not too far away there's a group of ten or less on their knees repenting, and sure enough, up in heaven the angels and the archangels are dancing and celebrating like they haven't danced and celebrated in quite a while. In Jesus' Name. Amen.