

## Lift High the Cross

Philippians 2:5-11

A Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

### Philippians 2:5-11

<sup>5</sup>Have this mind among yourselves,  
which is yours in Christ Jesus,  
<sup>6</sup>who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not count equality with God  
a thing to be grasped,  
<sup>7</sup>but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a servant,  
being born in the likeness of men.  
<sup>8</sup>And being found in human form  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient unto death,  
**even death on a cross.**  
<sup>9</sup>Therefore God has highly exalted him  
and bestowed on him the name  
which is above every name,  
<sup>10</sup>that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
<sup>11</sup>and every tongue confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

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A Lutheran couple was reading the Bible through in one year. They had bought what's called a chronological Bible, which is printed in such a way that you can read it in 365 days. It doesn't work well because we don't know the time and date for some of the books in the Old Testament.

The couple expressed some frustration with the readings. They asked: "Why does it keep repeating itself? It says the same thing over and over again."

There is a basic kind of poetry in the Bible, mostly in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament as well. We see it in the Psalms but also in most of the prophets. It is called parallelism. It is the same thing said again, slightly differently; this is called "synonymous." Or when what is said is the opposite, it is called "antithetic," or where there is progress in what is said, it is called "synthetic." There are really about six ways that parallelism works. It is not built like our poetry, which is based on rhyme and rhythm. It is somewhat similar to the poetry of an old English poem called Beowulf.

There is an old joke about poetry and prose in Moliere's play, *The Middle Class Gentleman*. Moliere wrote this play in 1670. In one scene the Philosopher says to the Middle Class Gentleman: "If it's not prose, it's poetry, and if it's not poetry, it's prose." The Middle Class Gentleman turns to the Philosopher and says: "For forty years I've been speaking prose, and I didn't even know it."

We find fragments of early hymns throughout the New Testament. One is in Ephesians 5:14, where it says: "Awake, O sleeper, arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light." This is probably something that was sung or used as a refrain at a baptismal service.

Our text for today, Philippians 2:6-11, is understood by the majority of scholars as a poetic form used in early hymnody. This only truly comes through when you translate it back into that Hebrew dialect called Aramaic. We have printed it out for you today in stanzas to show you how this poetic form worked. (The translation for verse 6 should have "a thing to be grasped" as the third line as we have printed it for you). We have three triplets, three parallel statements, and then three couplets, three double statements. The first part being Jesus Christ as he comes to descend to us, and then the second half, his glorification, his ascent into power.

[Philippians 2:6 states: "He did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped." Someone has said that means "understood." In English we can say: "I didn't grasp that," meaning "I didn't understand that." But not in the original language here. Rather it means "something that I hang on to."]

But as we look at Philippians 2:8, we see it has four lines! What has become evident to the majority of scholars (and is found in the most recent official Greek text of the New Testament, which is printed out in this poetic form), is that Paul added: "even death on the cross."

Why did Paul do that? He broke the poetic form! He broke the parallelism! These verses were a hymn that early Christians sang. The Christians were known as those who sang, but they had left off the cross, and Paul is correcting them.

The same kind of correction can be seen in Colossians 1:15-20. This text is also set up as a hymn. But right at the end in verse 20 there is something that breaks the parallelism: "Making peace by the blood of the cross."

We know something about this kind of thinking that overlooked the cross as we look at Corinth. What the people said is: "We're now saved. We're part of the resurrection. Therefore this life and all of its temptations are no longer relevant. We're going to show this by living wildly and sinning all over the place. We're free and above all this."

They had become confused, misled. For them the cross had become incidental. The big thing was the resurrection. We see the same problem in the book, *The DaVinci Code*. It is a twisted revision of history. What the author Daniel Brown did is really nothing new. The same kind of twisted revising was done in the Second and Third Centuries. And Daniel Brown isn't the only one in modern times who has done this; there are many others. In 1929 D.H Lawrence wrote a book called *A Man Who Died*, but he only appeared to die; he didn't really die. Somebody took his place, and he ran off with the pagan goddess Isis. This twisted revising of history has happened throughout church history.

What's behind it all, apart from the obvious nonsense of it all, is the question: Can God change? Does God change? Because change implies that there is that which was not as good and now is changed, or was good and now has changed for the worse. Change means imperfection, and therefore God doesn't change.

Over against the idea that God cannot change is the very direct witness of the New Testament that God did change. On the cross it was God against God, and we won. God actually came and died for us. That's enormous. Some will say only the human part died, not the God part. And you remember that the Council of Chalcedon established that Christ is unmixed and undivided, and we cannot separate the human and the divine.

Also, Luther and his close associate Brenz emphasized that God changed; God conquered death and that's basic. It's not trivial, it's not something by the way.

What does that mean for you and me here and now? We may be tempted to say basically the cross is not what it's really about; it's really about the resurrection. And there are others who have said that "the cross business" is a quirk that Christians have, but you don't find it seriously in other religions.

In 2015 the Chinese government decreed strict rules about how churches could display crosses. They had to be on the façades of buildings, not above them. They had to be of a color that blended into the building, not one that stood out. They had to be small, no more than one tenth of the height of the building's façade. But even that restricted freedom did not last. Now the Chinese government has abolished all crosses, and Chinese Christians are being heavily persecuted.

There's a Lutheran Church in California with a big decoration on the outside of the church in the middle of which is a cross. But the cross is removable. On Jewish high holy days, they hang the Star of David. When there's a Buddhist festival, they hang a lotus blossom. On Islamic holy days they hang a crescent, etc. etc. Those Lutherans think the decoration on their church shows everyone how open and tolerant they are. After all, aren't all religions about eternal life? In fact, we should be absolutely horrified at this kind of blasphemy.

You must not misunderstand. In no way are we denying the resurrection. There are those who could be called Christmas/Easter Christians. They show up on these big holidays. But we are Good Friday Christians. The center of what it is all about is the cross. It's true that the cross without the resurrection is a tragedy, but the resurrection without the cross is just a fantasy. And fantasy thinking is found in all kinds of religions. For them everything is about the resurrection as a super-miracle. No, that's not what it's about.

[Rather, the resurrection, like the cross, is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24), that which is without parallel, the *novum* (the totally new), beyond sin, death, and the devil, "beyond all that we ask or think" (Eph 3:20). Forde: "For in a theology of the cross, the cross and resurrection *is* the way," *Where God Meets Man*, 38. See *The Cross and the Crown*, 19.]

What matters are the two ways that make all the difference. We take the cross, to use a pun, deadly seriously. First of all, because it is how God takes our history as absolutely serious, as well as creation. Creation is not a myth of some fertility cult as most religions have it. Rather, the Lord himself comes into our history, and it is really and seriously that which he is involved in.

In the second place, he is establishing justice. This is not where God says: "Ha, ha, nothing matters." No, he establishes justice through the cross, and he deals with sin, and he does it justly and therefore he has conquered sin, death, and the devil, which are all the same thing. This is why we note very carefully John 19:30: "It is finished." It is finished there on the cross. It is guaranteed by the fact that there is the resurrection.

We have great hymns like "Lift High the Cross" which keep us focused "til all the world adore his sacred name." Or as Paul writes in 1 Cor 15:57: "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory in our Lord Jesus Christ." That's the victory over sin, death, and the devil mentioned in the previous verse.

As it says in Hebrews 2:14: ". . . he partook of the same nature that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage."

Paul writes at the conclusion of Galatians 6: "Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." Amen