

## How Paul changed this hymn

Philippians 2:1-13

A Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

There is a basic kind of poetry in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament. It is called parallelism. Something is said and then the same thing again in the next line, slightly differently. This is called “synonymous” parallelism. Or something is stated and then the opposite follows in the next line; that is called “antithetic” parallelism. Or where there is progress in what is said, it is called “synthetic” parallelism.

Scholars have identified as many as six different kinds of parallelism. Don’t worry. We won’t go through them all today.

There is a joke from the 1600’s about poetry and prose. You find it in Molière’s play, *The Middle Class Gentleman*, written 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.”

Back to the Bible and to poetry found, this time, in the New Testament.

In many places in the New Testament, we find fragments of hymns that were sung by early Christians. One such hymn is found in Ephesians 5:14, where it says: “Awake, O sleeper, arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light.” This was probably sung or spoken as a refrain at a baptism in the early church.

Another such hymn is found in our Philippians text for today, Philippians 2:6-11. This hymn has three triplets (three parallel statements), and then three couplets (three double statements). The first half of the hymn is about Jesus descending to us, and the second half is his ascent into glory and power.

You can print out these verses as you would for stanzas in a hymn. Then it’s easy to see the parallelism and how it was originally written and used. But Paul changed it. He broke the parallelism and added a phrase right there in the middle of the hymn. The line he added comes at the end of Philippians 2:8: “even death on a cross.”

Why did he do that? It breaks the poetic form. It breaks the parallelism. He added it because the hymn had left out the cross (!), that scandalous cross on which everything hinges. He is saying: “We need to get that in there.”

The same kind of correction was made in another ancient hymn, this one in Colossians 1:15-20. When you analyze the verses, you can see the parallelism, the poetry. But right at the end, in verse 20, there is something that breaks the parallelism: "Making peace by the blood of the cross." Again, the hymn was edited, added to, to make it explicit about the cross.

We know something about the kind of thinking that minimizes or downplays the cross. Remember those Christians at Corinth. They said: "We're now saved. We're part of the resurrection. Therefore, this life and all of its temptations are no longer relevant. Let's live wildly and do whatever we want all over the place. No boundaries, no guardrails."

They had become confused, misled, thinking liberty was license. They thought the cross was something that could go in the background, important, but not that important.

The same thing happens in every generation, even today.

It wasn't that long ago that the book, *The DaVinci Code*, was all the rage. It's a twisted rewriting of history. What the author Daniel Brown did is really nothing new. Many others have similarly, twisted Christian history to claim something outrageous.

For example, in 1929 D.H Lawrence wrote a book called *A Man Who Died*, but the twist was that Jesus only appeared to die; he didn't really die. Somebody took his place, and he ran off with the pagan goddess Isis.

There's a lot of nonsense like this in every generation. But behind the nonsense is a serious question: Can God change? Does God change? Because change implies that there is that which before was not as good, and now is changed for the better. Or it could be that what was before was good, and that now has changed for the worse.

In either case change means imperfection, and therefore it was said that God doesn't change.

Over against the idea that God cannot change is the witness of the New Testament that God did change. On the cross it was God against God. And who won?

We won. God actually came and died for us. That's enormous.

Some will fudge, saying only the human part of Jesus died, not the God part.

For this reason, we remember the Council of Chalcedon (451) and how it established that Christ is unmixed and undivided, so you can't separate the human part of Jesus from the divine part. It doesn't work that way.

[Luther and 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?

Like the Corinthians, we may be tempted to downplay the cross, say the cross is not what it's really about; it's really about the resurrection.

As we think about the cross as the main symbol of Christianity, it's useful to remember what is happening today in China. In 2015 the Chinese government decreed strict rules about how churches could display crosses. They had to be on the side or a façade of a building; it could not be on top of a building. The cross also had to be of a color that blended into the building, not one that stood out. The cross 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 and driven underground.

Or consider what's happening in our culture. There's a church in California which has 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 Christians are so open and tolerant they think all religions are basically the same. In fact, what they are doing is a kind of blasphemy, denying the Lordship of Christ.

Remember: 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.

Paul writes that the cross, is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24). The resurrection, too, is the power of God and the wisdom of God," that which is without parallel (!), the *novum* (that which is 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; 2022 edition, 33.]

We take the cross deadly seriously, and this matters in two ways. It matters first because it is how God takes our history absolutely seriously, as well as creation. Creation is not a myth of some fertility cult, as many religions would have it. Rather, the Lord himself comes into our world, our history, and it is really and seriously that with which he is involved.

In the second place, the Lord is establishing justice through the cross. There he deals with sin and evil; 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, and it is guaranteed by the fact that there is the resurrection.

Paul writes in 1 Cor 15:57: "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory in our Lord Jesus Christ." The cross is God's victory over sin, death, and the devil.

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."

And in our text for today in its closing stanza, it says: "Therefore God has exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11). Amen