

Sermon Text for February 21, 2021

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 45:22-25, Philippians 2:5-11 **“Christ the servant”**

We find ourselves today in the first Sunday of Lent, a lot of firsts for us here at FPC. Lent typically tends to be a time of self-denial and a time that we focus on what can we do for ourselves in order to make ourselves better people by giving something up, but what some would call suffering. So we determine for this season what we want to do for our own personal good. Often it is relegated to giving up food or drink for this season, or at least eating or drinking less. We sometimes think it is a good idea to read or pray more, this ought to bring us closer to God and so fulfill our desire during Lent to make ourselves better people.

The disciplines that I have encouraged all of us to take part in whether it be fasting, or praying, or reading Scripture, or meditation, or whatever else it might has the effect of making who better people. Who is the target of these disciplines and who benefits, at least immediately, from what typically we, myself included, encourage you to do during Lent. Typically the benefactor is us. We do things to make us better people, which of course in the long run should make those around us benefit as well, but directly the beneficiary is me, is us.

Lent is a reminder of who Jesus was, Jesus suffered so we ought to suffer in order to gain an appreciation and an understanding, at least minimally, of what he went through so that we can love him more. But keep in mind that what Jesus went through was not so that he could become a better person and closer to God. Jesus suffering on the cross had no reward attached to end where after her was on the cross he would be a better person. No, death has not postponed prize, he did what he did not for his own sake, but for ours. The direct beneficiary of what Jesus went through was each one of us.

Here is what I encourage us to do this year, and what a year to do it especially since we have been separated for so long, this Lent don't do something, or give something up just to benefit you and your own spiritual journey. Don't ask what you can do to make yourself more like Christ, but rather how can you become more like Christ for the sake of others. Don't make yourself first, but this Lent see what can you do to put others first with your actions, your thoughts, your mind and your soul. The example we see today of Lenten living is that of a servant. A servant does not look out first for the good of themselves, but rather for the good of the Master and the one that they are serving. Our Scripture will help us this morning with this thought.

READ

I know that some of you may not have had an opportunity to attend last Sunday online so you may have missed last week's sermon. Last week was pretty crucial to what we are going to be seeing this week so I'm going to give us a little bit of a refresher just so that we can all start this morning on the same page. If you remember Paul tells this church that he loves in Philippi that he would love it if they could make his joy complete. It is a bit manipulative, we mentioned that at our Bible Study on Thursday, if you want to do anything for me, make my joy complete, and how you make my joy complete is if you have the same mind. We saw in Acts the earliest Christian communities were defined by having the same mind because they shared all things in common, they broke bread together, they prayed together, they had all of their possessions in common as well. Make me happy Philippians, Paul says, be of the same mind.

He then gives them a formula on how to be of one mind and he says three things to them: don't be selfish, think of others as better than yourself, and put the interests of others ahead of yourself. It wasn't First Presbyterian First, or me First, it was a very clear Neighbor First policy was how you can be of one mind. If everyone is trying to outdo the other with humility and generosity it very quickly can become a community that is united and of one mind. That is where we left off last week.

This concept of others first is revolutionary in the times in which we are living today. As Christians Paul states, and Jesus shows which we will see later, that we are called not to be sure that it is me who benefits first, like our traditional Lenten disciplines, it is not my church, or my nation first, I would celebrate if half the church left and that allowed them to have a closer walk with Christ. It isn't about building or strengthening the church, it is about building the kingdom. We call this servant living and we have an example of one who commanded this for us as well.

Look at Mark 9:35 and Jesus tells his disciples that whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. So how do we make First Presbyterian first? By being servants to the community. This is who we are called to be by the example given to us by Jesus. And what does this example look like? Look at John 13:15 – where Jesus has washed the feet of the disciples and they didn't know what he was doing and he tells them again: I have set you an example that you should do as I have done to you. And what did Jesus do to them? He washed their feet, he was servant to them so they should be servants to each other. He says we will be blessed if we do them.

The example we have laid out for us in Scripture is where we find our sermon title for today, for this first Sunday in Lent. Jesus gave us the example of a servant and it is this example

that we have to follow. Let's look at our Philippians Scripture, sorry it took so long to get there. Paul begins after telling the church to make his joy complete by being of one mind and that means to not be selfish, to consider others better than you, and to look to the interests of others ahead of your own, he tells them in vs. 5 be of the same mind that was in Jesus. So he commands them to be of one mind and here he defines what that mind should be like. That mind should be the exact same one that Jesus had. What was Jesus' mind all about, what were his actions all about, demonstrating what it means to be a servant, it was all about servant living and Paul defines that in verses 6-11.

All the people who are really smart and write on these verses say that without a doubt verses 6-11 were originally a hymn that was sung while the early 1st and 2nd century church would meet together. They would sing these words in these verses as a statement of faith. You know as we say the Apostles' Creed together, they would sing these verses as a testimony to their faith. This hymn begins by describing Jesus the servant as one who was God but who did not take equality with God as something to trifle with. It is a rare person who finds themselves in a position of ultimate power and doesn't take advantage of it. We are used to people in power using their power to their own advantage and for their own purposes and for consolidating their power and making sure that their power never leaves so they can be in power forever.

Not Jesus, he did not see his power as God as something that should be exploited. There are apocryphal writings that portray Jesus as a child and periodically he does things that can be considered whimsical, but ultimately it is taking advantage of his power. None of those things happened, but our imagination can run wild a bit as we think of Jesus as a child with this power and would it would have been like. We know what it was like. He did not exploit his position of power. He was a servant from the very beginning of his reign on earth.

We read in vs.7 that he emptied himself. Can you see his image. Someone willingly emptying themselves for the sake of being a servant for others. Jesus chose to empty himself not for some Lenten discipline which would make him a better person. He emptied himself for our sake. He chose that style of life to be an example for us. We read in vs.8 that Jesus chose to be humble not for a reward but rather for death. He chose death with no reward in sight. There was no ulterior motive, but just a self-sacrificial, emptying, humble approach to his life which he knew would result in his death on the cross. Jesus was buried in a cave and not in tunnel that led to something else. This is who we worship.

We do read in Isaiah, in our first Scripture, that one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that God is God. Paul takes that Scripture and makes it his own for this

Scripture. Every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth, that wasn't in Isaiah. But just so we can be clear that everything in all of creation will bend the knee and confess. This exaltation comes as a result of his resurrection and Jesus' authority comes from the fact that as God he willingly suffered and died. All of this was self-sacrificial and the emphasis was not so that he would be worshipped, but rather so that we would have eternal life. All that Jesus did was for our sake, not for his.

You know these last verses is where we get the phrase Jesus is Lord. When we call Jesus our Lord, what does that make us? It makes us his servants. But our Lord is a servant himself. We worship a servant who taught us to be servants. Did you ever think of that? The power that Jesus has comes as a result of his suffering, that God came upon the earth and suffered as a human. If God had not done that then what theological attraction would he have for us. He would never be able to understand us, or what we go through. We could say easy for him to say, he never has been through what I've been through. Yes he has, yes he has. And lent is a reminder that our sufferings ought to produce within us a desire to be servants to others just as our Savior Jesus Christ was a servant for us.

This Scripture is normally read for Palm Sunday, but we are making our way through Philippians and it happened to fall on the first Sunday in Lent. The reason why it is read for Palm Sunday is because it is a judgment statement upon the kind of triumphalism that abandons the path of service and obedience. Christianity can easily fall into the trap of thinking that it is normal and it is of God to put ourselves first. No, that has never been our way. God requires us to be servants first, and then, and only then, will every knee bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. Amen.