

What Kind of a God is This?

A sermon by John Strommen on Philippians 2:1-13 May 6, 2018

Our lesson today tells us that Christ, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be exploited. You know, if you're actually God, you can pretty much do whatever you want when you want, and other lesser beings had better play ball. But that would be exploiting - taking advantage of the very people who probably need encouragement and empowerment.

Exploiting one's rank in the hierarchy is not a temptation unique to God. This was a lesson learned by Christian Herter, who was the governor of Massachusetts in the 1950's. He was seeking re-election at the time and after one really hard day on the campaign trail, after he had to skip lunch and arrive late afternoon to a church barbeque, he was really hungry and maybe a bit cranky. As he moved down the serving line, as Herter himself told the story, he held out his plate to the woman serving chicken. She put a piece on his plate and turned to the next person in line.

"Excuse me," the governor said. "Do you mind if I have another piece of chicken?"

"Sorry," the woman told him. "I'm supposed to give one piece of chicken to each person."

"But I'm starved," the governor said.

"Sorry," the woman said again. "Only one to a customer."

Governor Herter was apparently a modest and unassuming man but he decided this time he would throw his weight around just a little bit.

"Do you know who I am?" he said to this woman. "I'm the governor of the state."

"Do you know who I am?" the woman replied. "I'm the lady in charge of the chicken. Move along mister," she said.

Well, the governor tried to pull rank and the chicken lady was having none of it! Gutsy lady!

In our lesson today from Philippians, we learn that Christ, when he walked the earth as Jesus, most definitely did not ask the chicken lady if she knew who he was. No, Jesus was more inclined to join her behind the serving table and start serving chicken, or join our members last week who were making sandwiches for the homeless.

Verses 6-11 in the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians are referred to as the "Christological hymn" because it lays out a striking interpretation of *who Christ is*: God emptying himself and taking the form of a servant. For instance, most people throughout history have assumed that each person must rise up and make oneself presentable and holy enough to be acceptable to God. Here in the Christ hymn we learn that God stoops to our level - even the level of the very lowest among us. Two things are very

apparent here. First, in this emptying/lowering action on God's part, God intends to sort of scoop us up with all our messiness into the life of God. Yes, even - and especially - the lowly among us. And secondly, in this new life we're given, God is at work in you enabling you to work for God's purposes, and our model for how we work is a servant.

The very idea of God choosing radical downward mobility was completely against the expectations of the day. In the ancient world, a God who was born in human likeness was a self-demoting God – not a God who was very useful. Gods needed to be, you know, Godlike in their powers, capable of going to bat for you and your tribe. Now it's one thing for Zeus to put on a human suit and become human for a day and play tricks on people, but for the God above all others to adopt humility, to “empty himself taking the form of a slave,” subjecting himself to suffering and crucifixion? In Paul's and Jesus' culture, only slaves were supposed to be humble.

So of what value is a God of servitude, humility, and submission unto death?

Simply put, only a “servant God” can show us the way back to life. Jesus reverses the template laid down for humanity by Adam, who sought to become more like God, and in his striving, set a tragic course for human beings. Christ Jesus does just the opposite of Adam, becoming less like God on the power scale, in order to become, fully and humbly, human. It is only by Christ's reversal that we will ever be free from our dance with death. Only in Christ will we ever be able to let go of trying to play two-bit gods and relinquish the world it creates for us: a tragically tribal, dog-eat-dog world that makes “Game of Thrones” and “House of Cards” not unreasonable facsimiles of our own history. This fallen world consists of “win/lose” scenarios where, ultimately, everyone loses.

But then God comes down, all the way down, gathers us up into the life of God, and teaches us how to create “win/win” scenarios! Be a servant and serve the common good. Insist that everyone can win and no one is thrown to the side of the road. A point of view such as this comes from God.

Now, when Christ took the form of a slave or servant, we might think this is the *opposite* of God, but it is not. You want to know who God is, look at Jesus. Look at the servant, the hotel cleaning maid, or the lady serving chicken.

Now, to fully appreciate what Paul is suggesting here about God, we need to examine how his audience in the city of Philippi would have understood these words. Philippi could be divided into two groups: slave or free. Slaves in Philippi had more rights than slaves from our recent past – they were indentured servants, really – but slaves, nonetheless.

Now, in the Philippian world, if someone was free but did not have a slave, they were only marginally free. In pre-modern times, if you didn't have someone to do the menial tasks of life – cooking, cleaning, obtaining food every day, washing clothes, and the like – you may have been technically free, but you didn't have much *free time*. Without a slave, people in Philippi were typically bound to a largely private life, tied to the home front and to their own family, not able to pursue other things.

But for those who could afford a slave or slaves, they were free to leave the house and assemble in the public square. It was in the public square that free men gathered to discuss the state of their community and then take action on behalf of the common good. This is, in part, how the city of Philippi was run. In Philippians 1:27, Paul writes to the followers of Christ in Philippi that they are to live their lives “in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” This is the phrase translated from the Greek word, *polituesthe*, from which we get the word “politics.” What it meant in that context was that free men would gather to discuss and deliberate on behalf of the interests of their citizens. They were serving their neighbors!

It’s important to point out here that these verses do not constitute an endorsement of slavery. Rather, they are an affirmation of the value of those at the bottom and the value of the work they do.

What cannot be lost here is that the free men could leave the house and gather to engage in mission because their slaves *made them free*. Without a slave, you would not have that free time to assemble.

Now Paul is telling the new Christians in this Greek city that God in Jesus became a slave in this world. And who do you think the audience is who is reading this letter? Free men who had slaves. Free men who were free to assemble at church because of those slaves. And now Paul is saying God took the form of one of their slaves, the very ones who set their masters free.

Also, Paul is using an analogy here. Jesus didn’t actually become a slave to anyone in his life, and again, slavery is not being endorsed as an institution, even though it is assumed by the writer as a part of their world. But Jesus did come into this world to become fully invested in the human condition in its most lowly expressions, meaning God stands with the lowliest in our world. It also means that just as slaves and servants have always freed people to assemble publicly to be in mission, so too, does Christ come to us as a servant who sets us free. But free for what?

To live lives that are worthy of the good news of Jesus, Paul tells us in Philippians. Which means to gather in community and discern what God is calling us to do on behalf of our neighbors. So our callings, you see, are not a burden, but a blessing. Our callings, how God is at work in us working for his purpose, is one of the glories of our freedom. And in our freedom, don’t forget the lady serving chicken or the maid cleaning your hotel room. What they do is closer to the heart and mind of Christ than we can imagine! Amen.