

17th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 21A
Philippians 2:1-13
Matthew 21:23-32

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Back when my kids played soccer, it was the custom for players to take a knee whenever a player on the field was injured. It was a sign of respect and concern, and it was actually quite a moving sight, to see those active, fidgety boys from both teams stop what they were doing, go down on one knee, face toward the person who was hurt, and wait there in silence while the injured player was tended to. They stayed on one knee until the player either stood up and joined the game again or was escorted to the sidelines. As a mom, I loved that. Taking a knee was respectful. It was caring. It said, we are with you.

These days of course, taking a knee has a much wider symbolism. Starting with Colin Kaepernick 4 years ago now, taking a knee has become a sign of protest against the unfair treatment of Black Americans. What started on the US football field has become a globally-recognized symbol of fighting racism. It's common to see sports figures, or people at demonstrations, take a knee in solidarity, or raise a fist as a sign of commitment to racial justice. In its own way, this gesture too is a sign of caring for those who are injured. It's about recognizing that there is pain that needs to be addressed. It shows respect for human need. It says "We are with you."

And there's even more significance to this posture, historically and theologically. During the civil rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was photographed leading a group of civil rights marchers in taking a knee on a city sidewalk – they were taking a knee in prayer as they prepared to march one day. With heads bowed, they were setting an example by centering themselves in God and in their sacred purpose before they began their public action. It is powerful to see these photos of someone we revere as a moral giant, dressed in suit and tie, kneeling on bare concrete. That posture conveys sincere humility before God, and you can sense the deep strength it generated for the movement.

Humility is not a popular concept in public life today. Leaders assault us every day with barrages of brash self-promotion. Bullies grab headlines with crass putdowns of opponents. We don't often see leaders kneeling. Humility still does its good work but doesn't claim the spotlight, by its very nature. So if we are looking for a model of servant love and humble grace today, we will not look to any earthly leader. We will look to Jesus Christ himself.

Writing to the church in Philippi, the apostle Paul told them that in the end, every person, every creature, will honor the greatness and majesty of Jesus by taking a knee before him. Ultimately, all will recognize Christ as the true Lord of creation. Everyone will kneel. Paul is quoting from an early Christian hymn – a beautiful, poetic song he expected everyone to know. He was teaching about humility and mutual love.

As you read through this letter to the Philippians, you get the idea there was a conflict of some kind going on in that little church. Paul appealed to them to “be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” Paul wanted their life together to be a blessing, for them to feel their unity with each other. So he called out some attitudes and behaviors that can damage unity. Selfish ambition and conceit don’t help build community. Looking out for your own interests and your own concerns doesn’t help build community. Those were typical values in Roman society – upward mobility and aspiration. Not so different from American values today-- but corrosive to building community.

The opposite of these destructive attitudes is humility, especially combined with a genuine concern for others. Paul advised: “In humility regard others as better than yourselves.” And don’t look “to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” Paul didn’t mean for believers to degrade themselves or nurture an inferiority complex or become timid. He wasn’t telling them to give up or give in. He was simply calling them back to their core identity as people of Jesus. Reminding them of what helps create good conditions for community, where people care for each other and can overcome the inevitable problems in relationships. You can recognize genuine humility, not by low self-esteem, but by real concern for others – for their needs, their griefs, their hopes.

Paul quotes from the beautiful Christ hymn to express how Jesus did not choose the way of upward mobility, grasping and grabbing for more. Instead, Christ chose the way of downward mobility, in order to share completely in our experience of human life. Christ chose solidarity with us, with all of the broken and wounded human family. Christ drank the cup of human suffering all the way to the bottom, all the way to the cross, in order to give us healing and life with God. That is why God has exalted Christ, so that all of creation – every person, every creature, every being – will recognize Christ’s greatness and majesty, and take a knee out of awe and respect, bowing to honor Jesus as Lord. There is no self-promoting, self-exalting human ruler who could ever be capable of being that exalted Lord, who brings us healing and life. Only Jesus, who emptied himself, poured himself out – for us.

Paul implores the church at Philippi to take on this mindset of loving humility, as their surest path to experience the joys and blessings of a community that embodies Jesus’

way of love. And the invitation comes to us, too. It is a sure way forward for us, a way of blessing and joy, to bring this Christlike attitude to the challenging times we all face today.

We are now over six months into a worldwide pandemic, and humility is sorely needed as we address this virus. On a public level, we need humility that seeks good solid solutions instead of posturing and boasting. In every community, we need humility that places the welfare of others ahead of anyone's personal wishes and wants. Throughout these long months, each one of us has been learning humility in unexpected ways. As we observe physical distancing, wear masks, limit our gatherings, we are sacrificing our own comforts and desires for the sake of the public's health. And I want to say—thank you for the humble sacrifices you are making. It's an act of loving humility, every day.

You might have noticed that our everyday lives have taken on a more humble quality, too. We've turned into homebodies. We don't have much opportunity to strut our stuff in public anymore, so most people have let fashion go by the wayside for now. And haircuts, and even makeup sometimes. Just think, we used to worry what people would see in the background of our zoom screens – dirty dishes in the sink? a pile of laundry? Now we're not so worried about keeping up appearances—we're just so glad to see the faces of dear ones, our friends in Christ, on the screen in worship, or family and friends at other times. Our genuine concern for others has taken first place. In humility, we put external concerns aside in favor of mutual compassion and community.

The worldwide struggle for racial justice is calling us to another level of loving humility—and it's a good thing. In this suspended, heightened time, somehow our nation has been broken open to really begin to see, and we hope begin to correct, the racial injustices that have been going on for hundreds of years. Humility is called for, for all people of privilege. Those of us who have been in positions of power are being called to humble ourselves out of love. To admit we don't know everything, and we were wrong about so much. It turns out the world doesn't operate the way we thought. There is far more cruelty and pain and grief than we ever realized. It's time for a lot of us, myself included, to take a knee – stop everything and really listen to people of color speak their truth. Take a knee, in solidarity, out of respect for the injuries done to our brothers and sisters over the centuries. To re-learn, re-think, re-invest in God's new creation. Loving humility from people with privilege is one way to imitate Christ today.

I so appreciate the beauty of Paul's words to the people at Philippi. They seem uncommonly kind and inspiring, and we need that.

A person who works in natural disaster response has observed that when you are grinding away in an extended crisis situation, a situation of prolonged distress like we are facing, it's common to experience a "six-month slump" – a low ebb, for a time. And based on conversations with you and others, I'd say we're right on track for our six-month slump. At this stage in our shared pandemic experience, our energy is dipping a bit. Our hearts could use some extra encouragement this morning.

It could be that the believers in Philippi were feeling some of that too. Those early churches faced a lot of opposition. It was never smooth sailing for them. And they sometimes got tired, and cranky – maybe that's what was troubling that little church. So Paul commended humility and mutual compassion.

A friend of mine shared how this has helped her, in a damaging conflict that has been brewing with someone she was close to in the past. Things have really degenerated lately, and my friend did her best to work this conflict through, but there is a rift there that might not ever get mended. She says it helps to step back and try and view the situation with humility and love and acceptance. To realize, "I am not perfect. I am just doing the best I can in this very hard situation." And to see, "This other person is not perfect either, but they are doing the best they can, too." A humble, loving attitude can take us such a long way toward deeper grace and peace.

As we close, I invite us all to allow Paul's ancient and beautiful words to center us in God's goodness.

Saint Paul appealed, *"If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion, any sympathy, make my joy complete... Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,*

*who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

*Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name*

*that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.”*

Christ's path of love is the only path to the future we long for. That's why today, together, we do bend the knee, and bow our hearts, and confess that only Jesus is our Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.