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Philippians 2:1-13  
*Lifelong Journey of Faith*

The second chapter of the apostle Paul's letter to the church in Philippi is a text that gives us a glimpse of how the early church incorporated "theology" into the life of the community. Following an introduction - an exhortation - by Paul about how the community of faith is to see themselves and to act, we hear a hymn. Now don't worry, I am not going to sing it, but as I share the scripture, I will cue you as to when the hymn starts. It is a two stanza hymn that depicts the nature of Christ - his humanity in the first stanza and his divinity in the second stanza. It was equally hard for the people of first century Philippi, as it is for us today, to fully grasp the both/and statements of Christ: The human Christ who humbled himself to the point of death on the cross **is the same** Christ for which every knee shall bow and tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. Hear now these words from Philippians 2:1-13:

### **Philippians 2:1-13**

If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, (hymn starts)

who, though he existed in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be grasped,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
assuming human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a human,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.  
Therefore God exalted him even more highly  
and gave him the name  
that is above every other name,  
so that at the name given to 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. (end of hymn)

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence but much more now in my absence, work on your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

It was a status conscious place, a place where the powerful retired after serving the empire. A place where people who spent their lives jockeying to be the top dog continued the competition to win the race. It was a place where social hierarchies mattered, and who you dined with and how you dressed was the talk of the town. It was a place where everyone knew whose name was ascribed on the buildings; everywhere you looked there was a plaque bearing the name of "an important person." You know that kind of place. That was Philippi. In her commentary about our passage this morning, the Rev. Cynthia Jarvis quoting historian Joseph Hellerman says, "If Roman society in general had become the most status-symbol conscious culture of the ancient world,... no region east of Rome was more quintessentially Roman in this regard than the colony of Philippi."<sup>1</sup>

And Paul says,... "make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

,... "make my joy complete..." When I hear this phrase, I imagine Paul sitting on a deck overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, having a cup of tea after watching a glorious sunrise; the sun taking the edge off the cool morning, the palm fronds rustling in a gentle breeze. Well not so much. Paul actually writes this letter from prison. Scholars are not sure which stay in prison this was, but the community in Philippi have been praying for Paul's release and they send a member of the community, Epaphroditus, with gifts to supply Paul's needs. Epaphroditus delivers the gifts, but gets very sick - almost dying. When he recovers, Paul sends him back home to Philippi with this letter, a letter where Paul expresses that despite his circumstances, his heart is filled with much joy because the church in Philippi is thriving and that Paul remains in partnership with them.

Joy is the central theme throughout this letter, repeated 16 times in the short four chapters. When I was in seminary preparing to take the Bible Content Exam, one of the five standard ordination exams Presbyterian pastors must pass, we learned that if the question asked about joy - survey says Philippians is the correct answer.

And yet with all of the joy Paul felt for the church he founded with Lydia, the dealer of purple, on his first foray into Europe, as recorded in Acts 16, Paul still feels the need to write to the

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<sup>1</sup> Cynthia A. Jarvis. Proper 21 Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture. *Connections. A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*. Westminster John Knox. 2020. p343-344

Philippians about the ways in which they are called to be a people of faith. He ends this section of the letter saying, “for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God’s good pleasure.”

In a world where social capital mattered and mattered a lot; in a world the Empire was the Empire; in a world where one not just admired, but emulated the strong and powerful; in a world where humility was not a virtue, the faithful in Philippi needed words of encouragement. For what Paul is asking of them is so antithetical to the message they heard in the streets and the markets:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he existed in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be grasped,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
assuming human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a human,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.

That band of faithful in Philippi were on a lifelong journey of faith to become of the same mind, to become imitators of Christ and they need reinforcement and reassurance, and a reminder to whom they belong. As part of our life long journey of faith here at PCO, it our call to be imitators of Christ, which is in contradistinction to being impersonators of Christ. If we think we can do it on our own, if we think we can save the world or maybe just the neighbor next door, we are impersonating Christ. Paul is instead asking us to take on Christ’s mind and adopt Christ’s values in our lives. To empty ourselves of the vanities the world praises and then to commit to a journey where God fills us.

The term Paul uses to describe this emptying is the Greek word “kenosis”. And while kenosis has been the topic of study by scholars throughout the years, it is really those whose focus is on prayer and contemplative practices who have shed the most light on this kenotic “emptying.” It is as paradoxical as the statement we heard from the Gospel of Matthew last week, that the “last shall be first and the first shall be last.” It is in the giving up of one’s life – not the actual physical breathing life – but the identity one has taken- that one truly lives. It is letting go of personal claims, private ambitions, and past achievements to adopt a new identity in Christ.<sup>2</sup> This new identity is more than just abandoning external accomplishments. It also means identifying with Christ’s suffering and death, so much so that you can move beyond self-interest to see the beauty in the koinonia – the community – with all of its unraveled

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<sup>2</sup> Notes from Chris Holmes and Brennan Breed. *Office Hours: An Online Popup Bible Study Philippians: Good News That Can’t Be Bound* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sS9Fs8\\_30oI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sS9Fs8_30oI)

threads and sidewalk cracks. As the hymn in Philippians shares, it is the humility of Christ's brokenness for which Christ was exalted. The very thing that society disdained, that the social status-conscious people of Philippi mocked, the very act of death on a cross was transformed into the enduring power and freedom and beauty of the resurrection.

We can sometimes catch a glimpse of this kind of transformation – this emptying to be refilled – through prayer and contemplative practices. When we come to prayer in all of our vulnerability, with our hearts and minds truly open, we can be transformed. As author Anne Lamott shares in her book *Help Thanks Wow: Three Essential Prayers*, “Prayer is taking a chance that against all odds and past history, we are loved and chosen, and do not have to get it together before we show up. The opposite may be true: We may not be able to get it together until after we show up in such miserable shape.”<sup>3</sup>

We do not have to get it together before we show up. In fact, as Lamott shares, it is in showing up in what the social status-conscious Philippians people would describe as broken and scarred that we are transformed.

A few years ago I had the opportunity to experience what this transformative process can be like through an exercise in the Japanese art of kintsugi. The workshop was sponsored by the Charleston Atlantic Presbytery – my former presbytery – so I was experiencing this with other pastors and church leaders. We were told ahead of time to bring a porcelain or china cup, saucer, or piece of tile **that had significant meaning (note that last point – that had significant meaning)**. And we were told that we would break the item and put it back together with glue and gold paint.

Kintsugi literally means “golden repair”<sup>4</sup> in Japanese and is a method for repairing broken ceramics with a special lacquer mixed with gold, silver, or platinum. The philosophy behind the technique is to recognize the beauty and the history of the object and to visibly incorporate the repair into the new piece instead of disguising it. The gold-filled cracks of a once-broken item are a testament to its history. The process often results in something as beautiful, or more beautiful, than the original.

The first part of the process was harder than I thought it would be. What to bring? On the Thursday night before the Saturday workshop I spent a good hour (or more if I am honest) looking at all of the things around the house that met the criteria. And I vetoed every one – mostly because it was either a gift from someone I cared about and thought to myself – I can't break that – or it was something that had significance to both me and my husband Brian and it wasn't fair to him for me to break it. Or because it was something that matched our décor. I finally settled on a coffee cup that I liked, but that was already a little banged up and that I had gotten as free as SWAG from a vendor years ago. I was proud that I had finally found an

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<sup>3</sup> Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. Riverhead Books, 2012, p5–6.

<sup>4</sup> <https://pottershousemac.com/kintsugi-the-art-of-precious-scars/>

object that I was good with destroying. That is until the next day when it dawned on me that sacrificing a beat-up coffee cup that was a freebie was not really a sacrifice at all. And the hunt began again, and I found a plate that I had painted at a paint your own pottery placed that felt right. This was going to be a long process...

We started the workshop by sharing a bit about our ceramic and the significance it held for us. And then we each wrapped our object in a towel and struck it with a hammer. Nothing quite like watching a group of Presbyterian church leaders wielding hammers. "You mean you really want me to break this?" we asked. Most of us were timid, gently knocking at our ceramic. A few of my colleagues had a bit more aggression to get out and volunteered to smash the ceramics of those too faint-hearted. The instructor wouldn't allow that – you had to smash your own. We each had to have the courage to break apart that which is familiar and full of meaning. And we needed encouragement to have faith that what would emerge would likewise be precious.

We couldn't predict how the object would break – some broke into a few large pieces – others into many small ones – but they all broke. And as we recreated them – painstakingly and slowly gluing the pieces back together and adding gold to the cracks, our ceramics emerged as recognizable, yet transformed.

It was in the brokenness and the repair that the beauty was revealed. Kintsugi values the marks of wear that come from the use of an object. This is a rationale for keeping an object around even after it has broken, highlighting the cracks and repairs as simply an event in the life of an object rather than allowing its service to end at the time of its damage or breakage.

For me this experience of kintsugi was a powerful example of what our mission statement means when it says that the Church exists to invite everyone to join the lifelong journey of faith that is life in Jesus Christ. The transformation was not instantaneous, nor was it easy. It was a long process, first identifying that which was to be transformed, followed by the hard work of breaking it apart and then the slow process of recreation, to allow something new to emerge. Something that was recognizable, yet different and beautiful in its own way. That is our task as people of faith, for as Paul says, "it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure." As a people who belong to God, may your joy be complete in this lifelong journey of faith. Amen.