

FOLLOWING THE CROSS-SHAPED GOD -- Philippians 2:1-11

Good morning. My name is Joshua Steele.
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The title of this message is
"Following the Cross-Shaped God."

Today, traditionally known as "Palm Sunday," is an extremely significant liturgical moment within the Church year.

The majority of Lent is behind us,
and as we look ahead to Holy Week,
a transformation takes place.

- The cries of "**Hosanna!**" are still ringing in our ears
 - as we hear the bloodthirsty shout: "**Crucify him!**"
- "**God, save us!** (the meaning of Hosanna)"
 - becomes "**God, damn him!**"
- "**May Christ be blessed!**"
 - becomes "**May Christ be cursed!**,"
For, as Paul and Deuteronomy note:
"cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree."
- The excited waving of **supple palm branches**
becomes the **bloodstained wood of a Roman cross.**

A painful transition? Certainly.
A necessary reflection? Even more so!

This poignant combination
of triumphal entry and crucifixion
prepares us to live the Holy Week ahead,
and the entirety of our lives,
in the shadow of Christ's cross.

German theologian Jurgen Moltmann puts it well: "*At the centre of Christian faith is the history of Christ. At the centre of the history of Christ is his passion and his death on the cross.*"

There's no escaping it!
You can have moralism or religiosity without a cross, but **you cannot have a cross-less Christianity.**

As Christians,
we follow a CRUCIFIED-and-Risen Messiah.

This is not to deny the oft-neglected significance of the **Resurrection**, but it is a reminder that **the empty tomb only has saving significance to the extent that from it a once-DEAD man emerged!**

Ours is a "cruciform" or "cross-shaped" faith, because ours is a cross-shaped God.

There's no escaping it!

And as we prepare for Easter, we do well to remember that **our celebrations of the Resurrection will only be as rich as our reflections upon the Cross.**

So, let us consider the example of our older brother in the faith, the Apostle Paul, in his reflections on the Cross in Philippians 2:1-11.

*(Please open to the passage in your Bibles.
It's on page 980 in our pew Bibles.)*

Let us now consider how **our cross-shaped God calls us to follow him in unity through selfless humility.**

**This is Paul's main point:
UNITY THROUGH SELFLESS HUMILITY**

Just to whet your appetite, we're on our way to an examination of one of the richest passages about Jesus Christ in the entire Bible.

Philippians 2:6-11 has inspired more articles, devotionals, monographs, books, and debates than most people would ever have time to read in their entire life!

However, **too often, the passage is considered in isolation from its context.**

See, it's not as if Paul was penning the letter to the Philippians when, mid-quill-stroke, he decided that **they needed a list of true facts about Jesus to study for their upcoming Theology 101 exam!**

Instead, the rich section about Christ is intertwined with the argument, the flow of Paul's letter. **He's using the truth about Jesus to make a transformative point in the lives of his audience.**

****This is not to discount the value of theological knowledge!
Without it, you'll end up worshiping an idol, a false "god" of your own imagination!****

However, biblically-speaking, **"knowledge" is only true knowledge if it includes transformation.**

You can't truly know Christ if you don't know about him, **but knowing ABOUT Christ is NOT the same as knowing him** -- knowing Christ, as Paul will say in Philippians 3:8-10, in a way that **you are united with Christ in his sufferings, death, and resurrection.**

That's the kind of Christian knowledge we're after!

"So," Paul begins in chapter 2 verse 1, "if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy..."

Where is Paul going with this conditional sentence? Why the "**if**"?

Well, he wants his audience to agree with him, to get on board, because if you cannot consent to the things he's just mentioned, you probably aren't ready for the coming commands.

As the New Living Translation puts it: *"Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate?"*

If you can answer "Yes" to those questions, then you're ready for verse 2: *"then complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind."*

Paul is calling his audience to a robust Christian unity, a unity which entails oneness of

- **MIND,**
- **LOVE,**
- **SPIRIT,**
- **and PURPOSE.**

Instead of beams of light scattering every which way from a naked light-bulb, picture a powerful laser where each beam of light is shooting in the exact same direction.

**Picture Christians as humans united,
in every aspect of their being,
around a common goal,
a common purpose.**

The *common purpose*, incidentally,
in the book of Philippians and all of Scripture,
is the **GOSPEL** –

the Good News that
**God is reconciling all things to himself
through Jesus the Messiah.**

He is redeeming and restoring the universe he created, **and this reconciliation of all things to God entails a reconciliation of all things to each other** -- a healing of the sin-broken relationships

- between God and humanity,

- between humanity and itself,
- and between humanity and the rest of creation.

...

Now, one of the obstacles to this Gospel of cosmic reconciliation is PRIDE.

Ever since humanity rebelled against God and tried to steal his job, **unity and pride have mixed as well as oil and water**.

In fact, a good definition of sin is "*being turned or bent inward on oneself*"—
consumed with our own interests,
and constantly trying to protect
our own imagined significance.

Paul knows this,
so he continues the exhortation to UNITY with an exhortation to SELFLESS HUMILITY:

*"Do nothing from rivalry or conceit,
but in humility
count others more significant than yourselves.
Let each of you
look not only to his own interests,
but also to the interests of others."*

Sounds lovely, doesn't it?

"*Love your neighbor as yourself*" can sound wonderful, until you realize

- just how much you love yourself,
- and just how much your neighbor loves himself!

Selfless, humble unity is difficult!
It's hard to even imagine sometimes!

So Paul takes us to **the prime example of selfless humility, the one who makes selfless humility and unity possible:**

Jesus Christ,
the Humiliated and Exalted
Son of God.

Verse 5: "*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...*"

We've arrived at the FAMOUS PASSAGE ABOUT CHRIST, and it divides into two halves.
Picture it like a big "V":

- Christ's self-humiliation (2:6-8) and
- God's exaltation of Christ (2:9-11).

First, HUMILIATION (2:6-8):

Paul begins with Christ's undeniably divine status - He exists in the "*form of God*" - which the NIV interpretively yet rightly translates as "*being in very nature God*."

This doesn't just mean that Jesus somehow only *looked like* God - it refers to **his essence and nature as divine**.

We could spend the rest of our time *abstractly* commenting upon **what it means for Jesus to be God**, but Paul does so in our passage *concretely*.

Remember, the focus is on **having the same mind as Jesus Christ**.

So, if we are supposed to count or consider others as more significant than ourselves, what kind of a mind does Jesus have?

Well, he does "*not count (consider) equality with God a thing to be grasped*"!

This is counterintuitive!

Although any human being in a similar position would do differently, and has tried to do differently ever since the Fall in Genesis 3,

Jesus decides **not to exploit divine status for his own personal advantage, not to turn divine privilege and honor inward on himself**.

Instead, he does **two things**:

1. he makes himself nothing
(literally: "empties himself") and
2. he humbles himself.

We began with Christ's divine status, and here we have his **Incarnation**.

Now, we could spend the rest of our time commenting upon what "humbled" and "emptied himself" mean,

but Paul saves us time by describing those actions with a few phrases:

- Jesus "empties himself" or "makes himself nothing"
 - BY *taking the form of a servant* and
 - BY *being born in the likeness of men*.

The former phrase, "*form of a servant*," just like "*form of God*," refers to Christ's **essential character - not just divine, but now also a servant**.

The second phrase, "*likeness of men*," on its own, means that Jesus looked like a human.

But that's not all, because Paul continues to describe what it means for Christ to humble himself as "*being found in human form*."

Although this is a different Greek word than the previous one for "form," it is a stronger word than the term "likeness."

So, the **divine Christ** has emptied himself, has made himself nothing in self-giving by becoming **truly human**.

And now the **human Christ** *humbles himself*, **HOW?**

*"By becoming obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross."*

**Christ becomes human
to die the most dehumanizing death,
for the sake of humanity.**

We've reached **the bottom of Christ's condescension, the lowest point of the "V"**.

**Picture him, as divine and majestic,
diving from heavens heights
into our lowest depths,
into the muck and mire
of sin-stained human existence.**

**And at the very bottom of this cesspool,
there is a bloodstained cross.**

Friends, **the cross reveals at least two things**.

**First, it reveals the
UGLINESS OF OUR SIN.**

We've **sanitized** the cross to the point that we're comfortable with wearing it as jewelry!

*Picture an electric chair!
The ISIS beheadings!*

**Christ on the cross
was a gut-wrenching display of violence
against the one who deserved it the LEAST....**

**so that YOU AND I,
the ones who deserved it the MOST,
might clearly see
the heinous, brutal nature of our sin.**

Christ died vicariously for us,

so that we might *vicariously* realize exactly who we are without Him.

That is, he was truly Godforsaken,
Just like WE are, on our own, without Him,
So that we might never have to be Godforsaken!

...The Cross reveals the ugliness of our sin.

Secondly, the cross reveals the
CROSS-SHAPED,
self-giving nature of our God!

Because Jesus is the
"image of the invisible God,"
even though, to us,
his abandonment of divine privilege
and descent to the cross
may seem like the
strangest thing for God to do,

his radical actions reveal
precisely who God is!

Christ's humiliation is counterintuitive to us, but completely characteristic of God.

From *our* perspective, he makes himself nothing DESPITE being God,
but from *God's* perspective, he humbles himself for our sake BECAUSE he is that kind of God –
a God of humble,
self-giving,
selfless love

...

Now, *can we imitate Christ exactly in his incarnation?* No.
Can we die vicariously for the sins of the world? Of course not.

Christ is a unique example in these regards.

But his example, his **mindset** still stands:
selfless humility in the service of unity.

In the service of unity? How?
Christ is still at the bottom of our cesspool!

Thankfully, that's not the end of the story.

Let's complete the "V" with

EXALTATION (2:9-11):

Verse 9: "*Therefore*," Paul says, as a result of this humiliation, this condescension - "*God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.*"

- Divine status,
- Incarnation,
- Crucifixion,
- and now RESURRECTION
- and ASCENSION.

God *vindicates* the Crucified Messiah by **raising him from the grave** –

and because Christ has *precisely* revealed
what it actually means to be GOD,
he is given a

divine title and universal recognition.

This "name" Christ is given is not the name "Jesus, Ιησους, or Yeshua" but
"LORD! Κυριος! Adonai!,
(which is to say): YAHWEH!"

See, the mention of *every tongue confessing and every knee bowing* quotes Isaiah 45 –
a chapter which contains Yahweh's repeated refrain:
"I am the LORD, and there is no other."

For Paul to apply universal recognition of Lordship to **Jesus Christ** is therefore the strongest claim of divinity in this entire passage!

And yet, *even the exalted Christ does not hoard this honor for himself!*
As he is worshipfully acknowledged as Lord,
the glory goes to God the Father.

...

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

As I mentioned at the beginning:

Our cross-shaped God
calls us to selfless humility
in the service of unity.

(1) FIRST: We must remember that
we are called to worship and follow
the CRUCIFIED-and-Risen Christ.

Left to our own devices, we would prefer to just worship the exalted God - a naked majesty and power immune from any suffering or pain!

And yet, **if we do not heed the cross' revelation of God's power-in-weakness, we may very well worship an IDOL of our own imagination!**

(2) SECOND, We must also remember that **the cross is a source of profound encouragement in the midst of our chaotic suffering and pain in this life.**

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer memorably put it: "*Only the suffering God can help.*"

Where is God when we suffer?

He is in the midst of our weakness and pain.

He is **WITH US**.

And, as Paul will remind the Philippians in 3:8-10 and elsewhere, **union with Christ - true knowledge of Christ - results in being united with him in his suffering, death, and RESURRECTION!**

*When we join Christ in his humiliation,
he takes us through to exaltation.
That is our Christian HOPE.*

(3) And yet, THIRD and finally, we must remember that **there is no shortcut - no way to experience Christ's exaltation and resurrection unless we are united with him in his suffering and death.**

Again, as Bonhoeffer put it, "**When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.**"

Specifically, through this passage, Christ bids us **to come and die to ourselves** –
to crucify our self-interested
and divisive pride
for the sake of true UNITY,
with God,
with humanity,
and with all creation.

*It is only in dying to ourselves
that we can truly live
for God and for others.*

...

So, IMAGINE what this would look like

- at home,
- at work,
- at school,
- at Church...

If no task were somehow "beneath us" –
since the cross was not beneath Christ.

If our own goals and pet-interests could be set aside for the flourishing of

- our parents,
- our employees,
- our siblings,
- our friends,
- our fellow parishioners,
- even our *enemies*

-- as Christ set aside his own interests and freely gave himself for our sake when we were still his enemies!

Or what if we could be **humble** and be **unified**
even when it's not in the least bit
glamorous or *easy*?

- Even when we have to lose face,
- to apologize and ask forgiveness,
- or to suffer mistreatment or embarrassment without being able to vindicate ourselves.

Are we able to do this? Probably not.

Are we willing to do this? Even less likely!

BUT: Is CHRIST able to change us into those who are WILLING and ABLE to be SELFLESS, HUMBLE, and UNIFIED? CERTAINLY!

But remember:

*We can neither know nor worship
the cross-shaped God
apart from Christ's cross
and our own cross-shaped life.*

So, to close:

Having discussed the prime example
of selfless humility in the service of unity
- the One who makes these things possible
for proud, divisive human beings

like you and me –

...allow me to conclude
by repeating Paul's earlier commands.

*Let us hear these words anew,
and by God's grace
expressed in Christ's example,
let us leave this place changed.*

*Let us have the mindset of Christ,
let us complete Paul's joy
and God's redemptive mission:*

***"by being of the same mind,
having the same love,
being in full accord and of one mind.***

***Do[ing] nothing from rivalry or conceit,
but in humility count[ing] others more significant than [ourselves]."***

Amen.