

Empty-Minded

Philippians 2:1-13

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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On Friday afternoon, as I was out running a few errands, I saw a woman standing on a street corner.

She was wearing a sun hat with ear flaps (it was still unseasonably warm on Friday afternoon). She had a shopping cart full of a bunch of miscellaneous materials that I couldn't see clearly. She was waving a large Israeli flag.

And she was wearing a sandwich board. On one side, in big black letters, were the words:

JESUS IS SUPREME!

Quite an image, that one. A lot to unpack, most of which I will not be doing in my sermon. :)

I will say that am regularly amazed, and a bit unsettled, by the growing phenomenon of reducing our politics and opinions and ideologies and religious beliefs to slogans and signs in public spaces.

Whether it's bumper stickers that leave little room for doubt about one's opinions about this or that politician...

Or displaying an Alberta (or Canada) flag on one's property (it's fascinating to me that a Canadian flag means something very different in 2026 than it would have in 2021 during the pandemic)...

Or social media (Do I need to say more? Social media can easily turns us all into our own little private broadcasting networks).

On Friday, I even drove by a field where the flags of Alberta and Mexico were mounted on the harvesting equipment. I won't attempt to parse the politics there.

It often seems that provocation, not persuasion, is the order of the day.

And in our culture of polarization, I suspect none of it is terribly effective when it comes those who don't share our views. It doesn't lower the temperature on anything nor does it seem conducive to patient good faith dialogue.

At any rate, back to the lady and her sandwich board. Whatever I might make of her methods, what of the message?

Jesus is supreme.

Well, on one level I would say, "Yes and amen!" I believe that Jesus *is* supreme.

But the very next question would obviously be, "And what do we mean by 'supreme'?"

And the next question after *that* would be, "What *should* we mean, when we use the word 'supreme'?"

What does supremacy, Jesus-style, look like?

This brings us to our text of the day from Philippians 2. In this passage, Paul is quoting what many scholars believe to be one of the oldest hymns or poems of the church, likely written only a few years after the first Easter.

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.

N.T. Wright once said that Jesus shows us "a God who is known most clearly when he abandons his rights for the sake of the world."

Jesus models a refusal to scramble for advantage. Choosing the path of servanthood. Humbling oneself. Being obedient and submissive to the will of God.

This is no glorification of weakness. Many people have accused Christianity of this. And sadly, many Christian leaders have abused passages like this to keep vulnerable

and powerless people in their place. *You should be content in your low position because you are being like Jesus!*

But that is not what is going on here.

Jesus chose each one of these approaches deliberately and intentionally. This is a display of strength, conviction, and power.

This is a way of being in the world that is freely chosen. It is to expose as hollow and corrosive all the wearisome grasping after status, reputation, and righteousness that our world knows only too well.

It is a setting aside of status, rights, privileges. It is choosing to be identified with the lowly, the unlovely, the despised and rejected.

It is a complete redefinition of what supremacy looks like; it is a rebuke for where we so easily and naturally expect to find it.

Now, you might be thinking, well, what about the second part of the passage?

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.

This certainly sounds more triumphant, doesn't it? There's some supremacy language that we can more easily identify and get behind!

Everyone bowing down to Jesus in the end.

But I think we have to be really careful that we don't implicitly create a Jesus with a split-personality here.

I think we quite naturally do this. The first half of the poem, we think, shows us a Jesus who is humble and self-emptying and who rejects all of our cherished assumptions about power and strength for a few years while on earth.

But it's kind of just a means to an end, a prelude to the glory.

Jesus will be countercultural for a little while, but eventually he'll get around to ruling just like all the other rulers.

I mentioned that one side of the woman's sandwich board said "Jesus is Supreme." I didn't mention that the other side said, "**JESUS IS GOD.**"

To this I would say, "Yes and amen!" And unless we want to introduce some kind of deep division within the very character and nature of God, I think we have to say that the rule and reign—the supremacy of Jesus—will be consistent with the way he lived and died.

Every knee will bow not because a triumphant (and maybe even a little angry) Jesus will compel them to, but because their hearts have been softened and reoriented, their categories scrambled, their assumptions overturned.

Every tongue will confess because we will recognize how very wrong we were about what God is like and about how God rules.

My strong suspicion is that the bowing and the confessing will not be out of compulsion, but out of contrition.

The risen and reigning Jesus is not a different Jesus than the one who lived and taught and healed and forgave and liberated. It's the same Jesus.

This is the Jesus who is supreme.

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Ok. Well, it's good to have good and accurate ideas about God in our heads. I hope you agree! But so what? What does this mean for you and I in our everyday lives?

Quite simply, in this world we are to be like Jesus.

And I think Paul wants to remind those to whom is writing (and us) of two very important, non-negotiable things that ought to characterize every church that names Jesus Christ as Lord.

Unity and humility.

I don't suspect many people would find these to emphases particularly exceptional. Yes, the church is supposed to be united. Yes, we're supposed to be humble. Ho hum.

Neither of these virtues are particularly revelatory, even if we struggle to consistently make them a reality.

What's interesting is how Paul gets there. The passage begins with an "if." And it's followed a verse later by a "then."

Way back in my first year university logic class, we studied if/then statements. The formal term for these is "conditionals."

If condition *x* is met, then outcome *y* will follow.

We find conditionals throughout our daily lives. *If* you don't meet the early bird registration date, *then* you won't get the reduced rate. *If* you don't exercise and eat properly, *then* you'll run into all kinds of health problems. *If* my sermon goes forty-five minutes, *then* I might be preaching to an empty sanctuary. Etc.

Our passage today is a kind of a conditional. It's not an ironclad conditional of logic where *x* always and inevitably leads to *y*, but there is still an expected connection.

What does Paul say?

If...

you have any encouragement from being united with Christ
you have any comfort from his love
you have any common sharing in the Spirit
you have any tenderness and compassion

Then...

be like minded
have the same love

do nothing out of selfish ambition
in humility, value others above yourself

Humility does not equal self-abasement. To value others above yourself does not imply a kind of divinely inspired self-loathing.

It does mean that we are to be consistently striving to be other-focused. We are to resist the me-first mentality that pervades our individualistic and consumeristic culture. We are to crucify our tendencies to exalt ourselves at the expense of others.

So, if I were to shorten the conditionals of Philippians 2 into one statement, I might put it like this.

If, dear church, Jesus and his way mean anything at all to you, then you will be united and you will be humble.

Unity and humility. This is what Paul holds up for the church in Philippi and for us today.

Sometimes, it's interesting to look at conditionals in reverse.

If I am preaching to an empty sanctuary, then I have likely droned on too long.

And if the church is not particularly unified or humble, then... well, then what?

I regularly hear laments about how divided and conflicted the church in the West is. I regularly see evidence of how Christians can behave with a lack of humility toward one another.

We see this in our own Mennonite world, where we have divided and continue to divide over controversial issues (MKC in Ethiopia), where we seek to impose the rightness of our own views at the expense of others (this is true of both conservatives and liberals).

So, we know that the church does not always do humility and unity very well.

If this is true—and I realize that I am painting with very broad strokes, here—but if it's even partially, true, what does this say about us?

Is it possible that *if* unity and humility do not describe our reality...

Then we do not in fact have much encouragement from being united with Christ?

Then we do not, in fact, have much comfort from his love?

Then we do not, in fact, have common sharing in the Spirit?

Then we do not, in fact have much tenderness or compassion for our sisters and brothers or for our neighbours more broadly?

As I said, Paul's conditional is not an ironclad one like those in logic. But it's worth thinking about, isn't it?

Is it possible that the Jesus who redefined supremacy just doesn't matter as much to us as he should?

It is sobering to contemplate these things. But I think Scripture always holds up a mirror to us and we should not shy away from looking squarely at it.

Unity and humility should be the logical outcome of a church that has been touched by Jesus.

The encouragement and comfort and tenderness and compassion that we have received from Christ ought to flow out to one another as an expression of our devotion to Christ.

This is always my hope and prayer for us here at Lethbridge Mennonite Church.

We have differences here, too. We don't all have the same views on this or that issue or doctrine or practice.

But I hope and pray that we are all animated by love for the same Jesus. That we are seeking to have the mind of Christ in our relationships with one another.

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I don't know what you think when you hear a sermon like this.

Maybe you hear something like, “Well, great! I guess I have to go out and get busy having the mind of Christ and make sure I have my conditionals all straight!

On top of all the other things I must do in my life—on top of the bills and the kids and the job and anxieties about my grandkids and health concerns—now I have to figure this out, too!”

I have good news for you. The mind of Christ—like all of God’s good gifts—is just that. A gift.

To say that it is a gift is not to say that we are merely passive recipients.

Paul would not have told the Philippians to *have* the mind of Christ if he didn’t believe we have an active role to play in things.

But I fundamentally believe that the good news of the gospel is not, “Be better and try harder for Jesus!” It is, rather, “Believe and receive the hope and the blessing of what God, in Christ, has accomplished on your behalf and for the sake of the world.”

The mind of Christ isn’t something we have to conjure up. It is a gift to be received and shaped by over the course of a lifetime.

Elsewhere, when addressing the church in Corinth, Paul talks about how God has given us his spirit for discernment. He quotes the prophet Isaiah in asking a hypothetical question:

“For who has known the mind of the Lord
so as to instruct him?”

The implied answer is obvious: “no one.” God’s ways are immeasurably beyond us. This is the context of the quote from Isaiah.

But Paul goes on to end the passage with these words:

But we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16).

We have the mind of Christ. Already. Those of us who have cast our lot with Jesus already have his mind at work in us.

We are to have the mind of Christ. And, if we have accepted Christ, we already have it.

It is a gift and it is an invitation. It is something that already defines us and it is something to live into. It is already within us and it is waiting to find expression in the church and in the world.

There is a mystery at work here. How human activity interacts and intersects with God's work in the world doesn't always reduce to clean logic (thank God).

My prayer is that we would be like our Saviour in emptying ourselves for the sake of others.

That we would be united and humble. That the same love would guide all that we do and all that we are.

All because of who we are and whose we are.

Amen.

