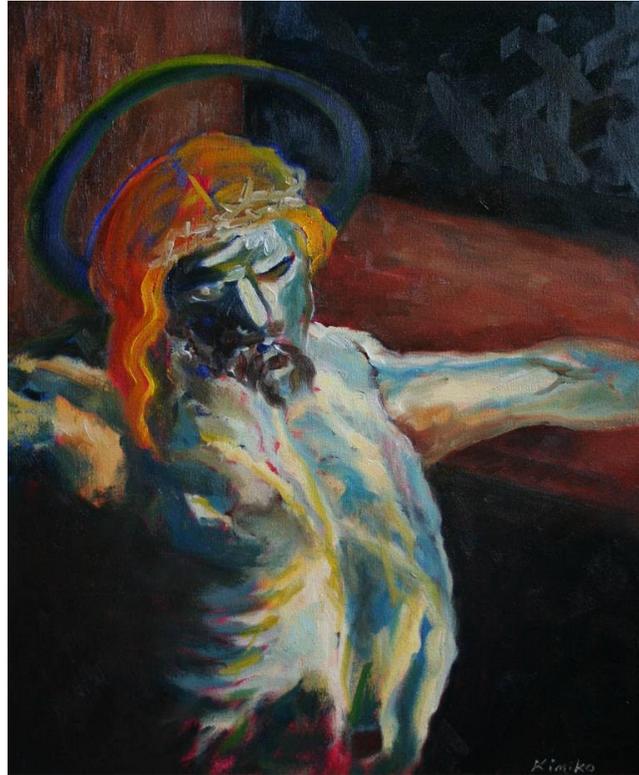


Midweek Lenten Service



The Purpose of Suffering: Reflecting on the importance of the suffering of Christ and the Church.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF HOLLYWOOD

The purpose of the Lenten services is to invite us into a time of contemplation as we look at the way in which our Lord suffered, the necessity of that suffering, and the importance of our participation in that suffering. While Advent was a time of curiosity and wonder, Lent is a time for us to reflect on the centrality of the Cross.

We invite you to individually or communally work through the liturgy that was designed for this service.

**For each prayer and scripture reading, select one person to read the normal text.
Read the bolded sections as a group.*

Call to Worship

from the Book of Common Worship

Grant unto us, O God, the fullness of your promises.
Where we have been weak, grant us your strength;
where we have been confused, grant us your guidance;
where we have been distraught, grant us your comfort;
where we have been dead, grant us your life.
Apart from you, O Lord, we are nothing,
in and with you we can do all things. **Amen.**

Opening Prayer

from the Book of Common Worship

O Christ,
out of your fullness we have all received grace upon grace.
You are our eternal hope;
you are patient and full of mercy;
you are generous to all who call upon you.
Save us, Lord.
O Christ, fountain of life and holiness,
you have taken away our sins.
On the cross you were wounded for our transgressions
and were bruised for our iniquities.
Save us, Lord.
O Christ, obedient unto death, source of all comfort,
our life and our resurrection, our peace and reconciliation:
Save us, Lord.
O Christ, Savior of all who trust you, hope of all who die for you,
and joy of all the saints:
Save us, Lord.
Jesus, Lamb of God,
have mercy on us.

Jesus, bearer of our sins,

have mercy on us.

Jesus, redeemer of the world,

grant us peace.

After a brief silence, the leader concludes the litany:

God of love,

as in Jesus Christ you gave yourself to us, so may we give ourselves to you,
living according to your holy will.

Keep our feet firmly in the way
where Christ leads us;

make our mouths speak the truth
that Christ teaches us;

fill our bodies with the life
that is Christ within us.

In his holy name we pray. **Amen.**

Opening Psalm – Psalm 51

Have mercy on me, O God,

according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass
judgment.

Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived
me.

You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my
secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be
clean;

wash me, and I shall be whiter than
snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness;

let the bones that you have crushed
rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within
me. **Amen.**

Prayer for Illumination

Written by Nick Barrett

God of creation,
just as when you spoke to a formless world
and gave it beauty from chaos,
we ask that your life-giving Spirit would flutter upon the dark waters of our hearts,
that we may hear your voice through these scriptures
and be made new. **Amen.**

Old Testament Reading – Jonah 3:1-9

“So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, ‘Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on a sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: ‘By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.’”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

New Testament Reading – Luke 9:18-27

“Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, ‘Who do the crowds say that I am?’ They answered, ‘John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered, ‘The Messiah of God.’ He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone, saying, ‘the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.’ Then he said to them all, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but forfeit themselves? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.’”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Time of Silence (*Spend 2-3 minutes in silent reflection*)

Homily

written by *Nelson Steinert*

“The Importance of Denying Oneself”

Text: Philippians 2:3-8

³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

As we near the midpoint of the Lenten season, we are invited to reflect upon one of the central purposes of this season; the passion and suffering of Christ. The theme for these three services is *The Purpose of Suffering: Reflecting on the importance of the suffering of Christ and his Church*. In each service we will look at a different aspect of Christ’s suffering, why he suffered in this way, and why we are called to participate in this suffering. Today we are looking at the theme of *Self-Denial* through Philippians 2:3-8. Here Paul not only illustrates the way in which the Church is supposed to behave, but also dictates Christ’s perfect embodiment of the behavior that his Church is supposed to demonstrate.

In this section of his letter, Paul first instructs his readers as to how they should regard others. **“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.”** Selfish ambition and conceit are introduced as two forms of disease that should not be characteristic of those who follow Christ, as they corrupt the unity of the body. What is shared between these two behaviors is the tendency to draw the individual or community into itself. When we operate from a position of selfish ambition, we make it impossible to look outside of our own wants and desires. We become obsessed with promoting ourselves. We look at others merely as barriers that must be traversed, rather than as human beings that share in the composition of the body of Christ.

But Paul offers a remedy to these diseases: Humility. This humility that Paul speaks of is central to the understanding of self-denial that I wish for us to focus on tonight, and

which we will return to later. Paul says that **“In humility regard others as better than yourselves.”** This is a harsh and intimidating statement, especially in our contemporary context wherein we consistently belittle and demonize those who think or behave differently. Thus, it must first be noted that there is no limit placed on who we are to regard more highly than ourselves. It does not say that we are to identify positive qualities in others that we do not possess and let that be the basis by which we think highly of others. This is a command that is given without restriction. This applies to anyone and everyone. Karl Barth wrote that **“Our dispute ends when we discover respect for each other, not on this ground or that ground, but perhaps without any ground, counter to every ground, simply because we are bidden when looking at our neighbor to think of the grace that Christ has extended to us.”**¹

Paul continues in verse 4 saying, **“look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”** The reason that we are to view the other’s interests as more highly than our own is *not* because their interests are better or closer to the truth than our own. Certainly, this is sometimes the case, but the true reason for this call to look to the interests of others is because it prompts unity. When we seek only our own desires and interests, no matter how righteous they are, we are drawn into ourselves and we no longer have any regard for others. However, when we look to the interest of others, we are drawn together in the community that Christ intends for his people. While selfish ambition and conceit draw us into ourselves; seeking the interest of others in humility, pushes us outside of ourselves.

Here, Paul is actually offering a critique of individualism; which is in fact at the heart of self-denial. In the same way that a primary characteristic of Christ’s ministry was his focus on and service to others, we too are called not to think of ourselves as individuals, but to seek out the needs and interests of others. This is a call into true community. A call to not focus solely on what I want, but rather to cast my focus upon the needs of others.

Paul then moves from addressing the individual to addressing the community. He states, **“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”** The *you* that is used here is actually the plural *you all*. Thus, we again see that Paul’s instruction to avoid self-centeredness is aimed at creating a community that operates with a unified mind. Now, it must be said that Paul is not asking for uniformity. He is asking for an inner sentiment for one another that is full of love as well as reflecting God’s love. He is asking that we seek unity by first seeing the other person as one that has been extended the same grace that has been extended to us. So, the community takes on a unified mind, but this unified mind is not something that it comes to on its own, but the same type that was first in Christ Jesus.

¹ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians*. 56.

Paul then moves into a rich explanation of the humility that was embodied by Christ. Verse 6 states, **“who, though he (Christ) was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.”** Paul first asserts the divinity of Christ. It is not that he was something closely resembling God, but that he was in the same form and substance as God. He has complete equality with God because he is God. Which makes the next statement so astounding: **“He did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.”** Christ willingly chooses not to exercise his divine rights. Because he was truly God, Christ had more of a right than any human being in history to assert his desires and do what he wanted. No human being has ever had a greater claim to thinking first of their own interests. Which makes what he does on the cross almost unbelievable. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Jesus could have been ruler of this world. As the Messiah the Jews had dreamed of, he could have freed Israel and led it to fame and honor. He is a remarkable man, who could have exercised dominion over the world even before the beginning of his ministry. Thus, it is even more remarkable that he turns down this offer...”²

I believe it is important to view our own absurdity in light of this truth. If Christ, who is truly God, willingly set aside the ultimate status; how then can we cling to any form of pride or assert any sense of superiority over another? Christ’s humility reveals our foolishness. John Calvin wrote, “Since then, the Son of God descended from so great a height, how unreasonable that we, who are nothing, should be lifted up with pride!”³

Instead of exercising his divinity, he **“emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.”** Christ does the opposite of what he had every right to do. Calvin also said that “Rather than ascending to the highest pinnacle of glory, he descends to the lowest status of shame and disgrace... The humility of the flesh covers the divine majesty like a curtain.”⁴ Christ voluntarily empties himself out and in comparison, to his divinity, takes on the lowest possible form. Though we as finite beings obviously cannot humble ourselves to the degree that Christ did, Paul instructs that it is this same mind that should be found in the Church. We are to refrain from exploiting or taking advantage of any superiority or power that we perceive to hold, and instead, put the needs of others above ourselves. 15th century theologian Thomas á Kempis said, “If you desire to know or learn anything to your advantage, then take delight in being unknown and unregarded. To take no account of oneself, but always to think well and highly of others is the highest wisdom and perfection.”⁵

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God is on the Cross*. 20.

³ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians: Calvin’s Commentaries* vol. xxi. 56.

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians: Calvin’s Commentaries* vol. xxi. 54.

⁵ Thomas a Kempis, *The Inner Life*. 46.

Our passage concludes in verse 8 where Paul states, **“And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.”** We see here the full extent of Christ’s humility and obedience. His obedience and humility are perfect in that they know no limit. Christ is not only obedient to the point of death; he is obedient to the point of a humiliating and contemptible death; a death worthy of a thief. The humility and suffering of Christ is perhaps best seen in Luke 22, where Christ pleads with the Father to take the cup from his hands. He is described as being in deep agony; even to the point of sweating blood. But even in the face of a suffering unknown to any other human being, Christ still denies himself. “Yet, not my will, but yours be done.”⁶

The point being made by Paul is that the humiliated and crucified Christ is the head of the Church. And if the head of the Church is characterized by his humility and suffering, how ridiculous is it for anyone inside the Church to set themselves above others? Paul insists on the cultivation of a community which takes on the mind of humility and obedience as embodied by Christ is the fellowship of believers.

This brings us back to the topic of humility and the theme of suffering that we are focusing on in these midweek services. It is humility that we find at the very heart of self-denial, but in true humility we encounter great suffering. I find that too often we speak cavalierly about humility. We certainly profess that humility is crucial to following Christ, but I think we often do not understand the full extent of what we are saying when we speak of this humility. Commenting on this passage from Philippians, Calvin states, “if anything in our whole life is difficult, to count others more highly than thyself is above everything else is so. Hence it is not to be wondered if humility is so rare a virtue.”⁷ Humility is not something that feels nice or comes easy to us. On the contrary, our pride builds in us a deeply rooted aversion to humility. To be humiliated, especially in our contemporary culture, is so repulsive to us, that we go to great lengths to avoid it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer insisted that when we suffer humiliation before God and our neighbor, we actually undergo a type of death.⁸ The prideful version of ourselves that we try so hard to present to the world is crucified when we suffer humiliation.

This form of humility takes place when we think of others above ourselves, when we confess concrete sins, when we forgive those who we deem unforgivable, or when we submit to the will of God at the expense of our own comfort and desires. This is painful humility. This is what it means to deny yourself.

⁶ Luke 22:42 (NRSV).

⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians: Calvin’s Commentaries* vol. xxi. 53.

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*. 114.

But this humiliation that cuts us down and kills our pride is not something that is to be endured without reason. Christ endured the suffering and humiliation of self-denial in order that we may be redeemed to himself and to each other. Similarly, when we endure the pain of self-denial and humility, we break through to true community with Christ and with our neighbors. Remember, Paul instructs his readers to think of others and seek their interests so that they may be united in the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.

Now, it is crucial that we recognize that this humility that we are called into is not possible without Christ's help. That is the paradoxical nature of humility. In order to become humble, you must first admit your inability to do so, and your dependence on Christ for the strength to deny yourself.

It may be rightly asked then, "what are the beginning steps to humility and denying of self?" If our natural inclination is to avoid humility because of the pain that it causes us, then where are we to begin? I believe that verse 8 offers us the answer to this. "... **he became obedient to the point of death...**" Obedience is the beginning of humility. Obedience is only possible when we put our will and desires aside, and instead do what God has called us to do. In the different call narratives of the disciples, they either leave their family or their profession behind, and instead follow Christ. And in Christ's case, his obedience ultimately leads to his death. Similarly, for us, our obedience leads to the painful death of self that we experience in humility. But also, like Christ, the suffering that we endure is not in vain. For Christ did not suffer for sufferings sake, but so that we may be rightly united with God. In our own humility and obedience to God, we experience unity with Him and our neighbor as Christ intends us to here and now.

So, as we continue in this season of Lent, let us look first to the interest of others. Let us regard others more highly than we regard ourselves. In humility, let's seek to obey that which Christ has called us to do, both individually and community. May all this be done so that as the people of God we may be united in that same mind that was in Christ.

Glory be to the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever, and to the ages of ages. Amen.

Affirmation of Faith *(Said All Together)*

Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,
begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God,
Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made;
of the same essence as the Father.
Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven;
he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary,
and was made human. He was crucified for us
under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried.
The third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead.
His kingdom will never end.
And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.
He proceeds from the Father and the Son,
and with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.
He spoke through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.
We affirm one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look forward to the resurrection of the dead,
and to life in the world to come. Amen.

Prayer of Confession *(Together)*

from the Book of Common Worship

**God of mercy, you sent Jesus Christ to seek and save the lost.
We confess that we have strayed from you and turned aside from your way.
We are misled by pride,
for we see ourselves pure when we are stained,
and great when we are small.
We have failed in love,
neglected justice,
and ignored your truth.
Have mercy, O God, and forgive our sin.
Return us to paths of righteousness
through Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.**

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Written by Jourdan Turner

These are strange and hard times. We are watching and waiting, at times anxiously, trying to tend to our bodies, our souls and our community. Scripture tells us that God put on flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. What a very real comfort that is to us now.

Jesus you know what it is to have a real body, you know what it is to suffer in the body. We are not alone in our humanity, there is grace for this too, for our very bodies. Thank you for suffering with us, for us, in the flesh, not the abstract. Meet us in the suffering of our bodies, in the anxiousness of illness. You are not distant, or unfamiliar with these things. You have lived them and meet us here now.

Jesus, you moved into the neighborhood. You had a family, friends, a community. You know what it is to weep over friends, to be far from family, to care for a community and neighbors. Thank you that your love for our family, neighbors and friends exceeds our own. Hold our dear ones close when we literally cannot.

Scripture says that you were a man of many sorrows, acquainted with loneliness. We are grateful during this time that you understand our deep sadness, you enter into our loneliness because you have experienced yourself. You offer not just a sympathetic ear, or a distanced understanding, but a deep deep empathy, a joining in, an embodying of these struggles. You have compassion in its true definition - to suffer with- you suffer with us now.

We are more grateful than ever that you are EMMANUEL, God with us. We are aware more than usual that we depend on your very real presence. Your real presence in the Eucharist is a gift of grace. We declare again in the Eucharist, that your suffering, and your victory, were not just spiritual but also physical. You lived, suffered, died and were raised again in a real body. Your victory was over death both spiritual and physical. We need your grace and rescue now in our bodies and souls. Thank you for doing what we could not do for ourselves, thank you that you continue to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. **Amen.**

Charge and Blessing

from the Book of Common Worship

Go out into the world in peace;
have courage;
hold on to what is good;
return no one evil for evil;
strengthen the fainthearted;
support the weak, and help the suffering; honor all people;
love and serve the Lord,
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**