

The Biggest Word

October 2, 2022; 17th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Rev. Laurel Hamilton, Presbyterian Church (USA)

Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Schererville, IN

Philippians 2:1-13

Our text this morning begins with what many consider the biggest word in the English language, even though it only contains two letters. IF. If I win the lottery.... If I get that job.... If the diagnosis is.... If. IF there is any comfort in Christ. IF there is any consolation from love. IF there is any partnership in the Spirit. IF there is any tender affection and sympathy. THEN, Paul says, make my joy complete - and then he promptly attempts to confuse us. He tells us to be of one mind and to be of one accord with each other. Yet one verse later he tells us to be in humility and to regard others as better than ourselves. Unity and Humility. Two common thoughts that on first glance, don't seem to have anything to do with each other.

When I was on the Debate Team in high school, we had a tool commonly referred to as the power of fiat. As in, I could propose a national law addressing health insurance (yes, we were debating national health insurance in the late 70's!) and use "the power of fiat" to proclaim this law would pass and actually become law. Never mind democrats vs republicans, never mind rural vs suburban. Merely by saying it, I could proceed with the proposal, not needing to worry about the political, social, or economic issues that might stop the bill from becoming law. So today, I'm going to use the power of fiat to remove Paul's "if" and replace it with "where". So let's take another look at the opening statement for this morning. WHERE there is comfort in Christ. WHERE there is consolation from love. WHERE there is partnership with the Spirit. WHERE there is tender affection and sympathy. OK, we have all those things, now what? Paul wants to then find us being of the same mind, having the same love, and being in full accord and of one mind with each other.

Continuing with this power of fiat, because now I'm going to take it one step further - the "where" is not some ambiguous location only found in some place in my mind, but is here and now. Today, in this sanctuary. Together, as we worship, is where these attributes will be found. Yes. I am expecting that we all take comfort in Jesus Christ. I am anticipating that we all find consolation in love. I am speculating that we all find ourselves working with, rather than against, the Holy Spirit. And I know that there is affection and sympathy to be found here.

SO now, rather than opening with four "if" statements, I have imagined them into reality through the power of fiat. And honestly, who here would disagree with me that we are, indeed, always attempting to fulfill these "if" statements from Paul?

So now let's continue looking at this text from Paul. After his "if...then" statements, he tells us that because of these statements, we are to have the same mind as Christ. Now this is getting serious - it's no longer a feel-good, pat ourselves on the back passage because we have fulfilled his "if" statements. THAT was the easy part.

Then, Paul shares information about Jesus Christ. Commentators have shared what historians view as a hymn that Paul's readers would recognize, sharing adulation towards Christ. Theologian Scott Hoezee uses his own words, taking the hymn from Paul and putting it into common vernacular. "Jesus had to give up a lot in order to join us on this fallen planet. At minimum he had to give up the glories and splendors of heaven in favor of a world of indigestion, stubbed toes, dirty fingernails, and backaches. But he may also have needed to give up certain other perks and powers of divinity for a little while in order to be truly human. He had to restrain his power, restrict his location to just one place at a time (instead of being omnipresent), give in to his body by eating when he got hungry and laying down for a nap when he got tired.

"He made himself *nothing*," the apostle Paul sings. He not only was no longer living in exalted heights, he even ended up dying the worst, most public of all deaths: crucifixion. And he did it all out of a humble love of astonishing

proportions. “If you want to get the hang of the incarnation,” C.S. Lewis once wrote, “just imagine how you’d feel if you woke up one morning to discover you had turned into a garden slug.”

Imagine, indeed.

Taking this one step further, in a sermon by Diana Bass, “Jesus Takes a Knee”, for World Communion Sunday wrote “These beautiful words in Philippians point toward the finality of all Caesars and all throne rooms. In Jesus, hierarchies of power, based in honor and loyalty fall. Their delusions revealed for what they are: shame and violence. These throne rooms give way to banquet rooms, a high chair of glory replaced by a table of compassion and sympathy and humility, where all feast and serve. To enter this room, we do kneel – we kneel in imitation of Jesus, the One who invited us to this meal by taking the form of a slave and washed our feet. This exultation is the exultation of loving our neighbor, not a exultation of power whereby Christians rule as some new Caesar. No. The rule of Jesus is that of bended knee. Not toward him, but with him, and toward one another in endless mercy.”

Take a knee. Live life on bended knee. In our recent history, some folk have looked down on some others that have publicly been on bended knee. And then there are some of us whose knees creak and groan stiffly, stopping us from literally taking a knee. So how do we figuratively share in the bended knee with Jesus, toward one another in endless mercy? What might it look like to figuratively be on bended knee with Jesus Christ on this, World Communion Sunday?

We need to give up our boasting, our assumptions about ourselves, our community, our nation, and our world on this, World Communion Sunday.

Jesus didn’t boast about himself, his hometown, his country of origin, or about anything else. So if we are to be like Jesus, humble and on bended knee, what do we need to give up?

We need to give up thinking that our country was founded as a Christian nation. Quite the opposite, in fact! The first pilgrims came here to escape religious persecution and the imposition of the faith of others on them, and our Bill of Rights engraves in stone the fact that our government and our religious and our faith practices shall never be entwined.

We need to give up thinking that our town, our community, our nation, as well as ourselves, that we are exceptional from the rest of the world. Quite truthfully, God has not given you, or I, or Schererville, or Indiana, or even the US, particular blessings and privileges not available to other people in other towns, states, and countries. We have freedoms and privileges because we are all beloved children of God, and because you and I are lucky enough to live in a country where our entire government is set up to give us privileges. These blessings and privileges are available to anyone living here, Christian or otherwise.

As we struggle to remain on bended knee with Jesus, we need to remember that as Christians, we do not, nor should we, enjoy privileged status, here or anywhere else. Our country was founded on freedom FROM religious mandates, not because of them. We should not expect legal protection because of our religious beliefs and faith practices. Rather, we should appreciate the freedom granted us in the Constitution.

We should be looking at our church leaders for guidance on the how's, why's, and what's of our faith practices - Jennifer Burns Lewis, our Executive Presbyter and Marjorie Reinsch, our Stated Clerk. We should look towards Rev Ruth Santana-Grace and Rev Shavon Starling-Louis, our general assembly moderators, and J Herbert Nelson, our general assembly, stated clerk, for guidance on our religious lives. We should look to our civic, local, regional, and national political leaders for guidance on matters not related to our faith.

In our most recent presidential election, in 2020, the two national candidates and their supporting communities spent \$4.9 BILLION in their attempt to serve as our president. That comes to about \$22 per voter, across the United States. What did

it cost Jesus to serve us? His life. Which of these three figures humbled himself to become our true leader, guide, and savior of us all?

One final word about following Jesus, living into God's call on our lives, and the world around us. In just a few minutes, we will share in the elements, in remembrance of Jesus, with followers of Jesus across the community and around the world. We are invited to this table, we come to this table, because first, God calls us to this, God's table. And we come also because we have the privilege and freedom to come to this table and worship as we choose. Let us give thanks for this opportunity, and join in gratitude with those others similarly called by God to live and serve on bended knee. Thanks be to God. Amen.