



17 Pentecost, October 1, 2017 St Paul's on-the-Hill, Charles D. Mayer

Good morning. It is so good to be back with you! I missed you last month because I was co-officiating and preaching at my nephew's wedding in Ithaca. It was a joy to be a part of the beginning of a young couple's journey. And it is interesting, because the church at Philippi – to which today's epistle lesson is addressed – was the first church established by Paul on European soil. Paul had a close and happy relationship with the Philippian Christians, and it does not seem far-fetched at all to imagine that they are to him like a couple he knew at the beginning of their journey who have grown and matured in a way that delights and pleases him. Indeed, the Philippian Christians are his friends, and the tone of the letter is warm and affectionate. Paul is writing from prison, and expresses that he imagines his death may be close; so he is writing to people he loves, thinking he may never see them again, reminding them of the Gospel he preached to them when they were a new, young church.

Today's lesson is really the centerpiece of the entire letter: it contains the great Christological hymn that is one of Paul's most famous passages. It seems that this really was a hymn, in the same sense that we would use the word, and that Paul had taught it to the Philippians when he first ministered to them. So he reminds them of his teaching primarily by reminding them of this hymn.

This hymn is a very, very early Christian text. It is likely that it was not original to Paul, but that Paul had learned it as a new convert to Christianity. That probably places the hymn in the 30s; so just a very short time after the resurrection. This is quite an amazing date for the hymn when we look at its very high Christology. Listen again to the beginning of the hymn: "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 (Phil. 2:5-7). We have very strong evidence here that at least in one community in the earliest days of the Jesus movement there was a Christology – a theology of

Jesus – very much like the theology of the Gospel of John, written some sixty years later. We have in the hymn a clear picture of a pre-existing Christ Jesus – think of “the Word” in John’s gospel – who has “equality with God,” and then takes human form. So while it is probably true that this high Christology was not present throughout the Jesus movement for many decades after the resurrection, it was beginning to take shape very early. Paul knew it and taught it, and it seems clear that it was formative in the development of the Philippian church.

Now listen again to the rest of the hymn: “And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of 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” (Phil. 2:8-11).

This incredible description of the ultimate act of humility represented by the death of the Son of God on the cross provides the kernel of the main point that Paul wants to make to the Philippians. They are the first church he founded in Europe. They are old friends, dear to Paul. They have a very high Christology, well before many other communities do. They are mature, established believers. And what does Paul choose to emphasize with them? “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3). As in all communities, there was some dissension in the Philippian church. Paul admonishes them that their maturity of faith and theological depth should never be occasions for pride or arrogance, but should instead remind them that their Lord’s absolute humility is the model for every believer’s life. “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4). The true mark of the mature Christian life is an orientation of humility.

“Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it’s thinking of yourself less,” Carl Jung once said. The great twentieth century psychoanalyst, a lifelong student of human personality who was also a pastor’s son, arrived in his mature years at a conclusion very much like Paul’s. Wealth of experience and depth of insight are great things; a focus on the needs of others and the world is even greater. May we in this church

named for St. Paul carry this truth in our hearts, and out to a world that needs us now more than ever.