

God is at Work in You
Philippians 2:1-18
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First Central Congregational UCC
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Once upon a time, Greek troops were gathered besieging the city of Troy. They were commanded by Agamemnon and their greatest hero was Achilles. Whenever Achilles led them in battle, they were victorious, though the war had dragged on for many years. King Agamemnon took from Prince Achilles the slave girl Briseis, whom Achilles had won as plunder in battle. The honor of Achilles was insulted by Agamemnon, and Achilles reacted angrily, arrogantly, and petulantly. He refused to participate in battle anymore. While he refused to fight, the Trojans gained in battle; they won many victories against the Greeks. There were devastating consequences for his fellow soldiers; friends and allies died in battle. Eventually, Achilles' lover, Patroclus, attempted to rally the troops by wearing Achilles' armor and leading them into battle. Patroclus was initially successful, defeating some of the mighty warriors of the Trojans, only to be cut down by Hector. Achilles' refusal to fight resulted in the death of his own lover. It was then that Achilles overwhelmed with grief, re-entered the war consumed by wrath.

Homer's *Iliad* tells only a small chapter of the story of the Trojan War. He tells this story of Achilles, a great hero who illustrates a horrible vice – *hubris*. Achilles may have been brave and strong, but even he could think more highly of himself than he ought. And in doing so, he brought destruction upon that which he most loved.

In Philippians 2, Paul writes about Jesus the Christ and encourages us to live by Jesus' example, participating in the kind of life that Jesus made possible. This way of life is a community of mutual regard, one that displays the virtues of love, sharing, and compassion. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or vain conceit," Paul writes, "but in humility regard others as better than yourselves."

During graduate school I became interested in the virtue of humility and for one of my classes I wrote a paper about it. My friend Marty Peercy loved the statement I made one day after I wrote that paper. I told him, "I wrote a great paper on humility."

It's funny because we've been told that taking pride in one's self or one's work is a vice, that a humble person actually minimizes their value and their work. We are told that to be humble is to think less of oneself than one is worth. I believe this to be a mis-characterization of the virtue of humility. In fact, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle called this attitude a vice. To think less of one's self than one is worth is the vice of pusillanimity – a great English word that is rarely used.

It does have the corresponding vice of thinking more of oneself than one is worth. That is the hubris of Achilles, also sometimes called vanity. The vain person exalts himself and his position above others to the detriment of the community.

The virtue lies between those vicious ends. The virtue is to have a proper sense of self –

not thinking one is worth less or worth more than one is. This is what can accurately be labeled the Christian virtue of humility.

It also comes with one other condition. It is not enough to simply have a true sense of self, one must also understand one's place in relationship to others. This is something St. Paul makes very clear here in Philippians 2. The humble person is someone who lives in unity with others. The Roman Catholic scholar Luke Timothy Johnson describes it as "placing oneself appropriately within the life of the community." Part of the tragedy of Achilles' is that his actions are detrimental to the life of the community.

The humble person knows that they have worth and value, that they are a beloved child of God. To take pride in that truth is not a vice. But the humble person also acknowledges everyone else's worth and value too. The humble person knows that everyone else they encounter is a beloved child of God worthy of their love, sharing, and compassion.

On Wednesday nights we've been exploring the relationship between faith and work and the role of the church in helping us to navigate the ethical issues we face on the job. In the chapter we discussed last Wednesday, the author, John C. Knapp, developed a moral theology of work. He wrote that in the workplace we should be guided by the admonitions of the prophet Micah – to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly. Knapp reminded us that "It is easy to fall prey to an illusion of becoming self-sufficient through the accumulation of material wealth." This could lead to arrogance and vanity and immoral decision-making. Instead, we must remember that our success relies upon other people. We should understand our connections and relationships with others. And we can only value others if we have a humble attitude. Knapp writes that we only fully understand who we are by understanding the web of relationships that connect us to a wider community. He writes, "Self-understanding does not lie *within* us; rather, we can only begin to understand ourselves through the eyes of others *beyond* ourselves."

And in Philippians Paul invites us to work out our own salvation by joining a new community shaped according to the life of Jesus of Nazareth. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," he writes, before summarizing the story of Jesus. We are invited to shape our identity through Jesus' story.

What follows is not a treatise on profound doctrines; it is most likely a hymn of the early church.

Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped,
but emptied himself,

The hymn proclaims that in Jesus we have experienced something new and that something new is altering what we know about God, about ourselves, and about human society.

Unlike Achilles, Jesus does not arrogantly defend his honor or prestige. Instead, he surrenders what honor is due him and becomes like a slave. We say that Jesus is the revelation and incarnation of God in human form. According to this hymn, Jesus revealed that divinity is not about power, glory, or sovereignty. Instead, divinity empties itself in order to accompany

us. Theologian Morna D. Hooker writes, “Christ emptied himself . . . because that is what God is like.”

The primary Christian proclamation about God is that God is the one who empties God’s self in order to accompany us in our suffering. If there is no other lesson we learn from the story of the Crucifixion, it should be that one. God accompanies us.

The God revealed in Jesus of Nazareth feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, heals the sick, visits those in prison, cares for widows and orphans, values the mentally ill, forgives the sinner, includes the outcast, treats women as worthy, welcomes children, confronts the powers-that-be, and dies on the cross. This is the God of extravagant grace, radical inclusion, and relentless compassion. And it is this God who is at work in you.

Paul imagines a new community shaped by this experience of God in Jesus. It is a community which follows the way of love, sharing, and compassion to complete joy. It is a community of humble persons.

Make your work worthy this Holy Week by accepting the invitation to become part of the way of Jesus, having the same mind as Christ. Today I invite to join the adventure.