

## “Ubuntu”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau  
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Philippians 2:1-13

September 2, 2018

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Our Wednesday night program this week doesn't sound flashy. I'll be presenting a recap of the 223rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which took place this past June in St. Louis. If you're nerdy about all things Presbyterian, this supper is for you. But even if you know nothing about the work of our denomination — actually, *especially* if you know nothing about the work of our denomination! — you're bound to find something in the work of GA to make you curious, excited, or encouraged. Our General Assembly has been responding to the world in which the church finds itself with surprising deftness. There are real reasons to be proud to be a Presbyterian beyond our quirky community.

One of the actions taken this June involves our *Book of Confessions*. The last time I held up my copy of this book in the pulpit, it was a couple of year ago, to celebrate the addition of a new confession — the *Confession of Belhar*, which comes out of the resistance to the legal segregation and discrimination of apartheid in South Africa. My Church History professor in seminary made us rip the back cover off of our copies of the *Book of Confessions* to remind ourselves that this book is incomplete. It currently contains twelve confessions, starting with the *Apostles' and Nicene Creeds*, and then a handful of Reformation-era documents, with four 20th Century documents rounding out the collection of texts. These are texts that speak the Church's faith to particular cultural moments and geographic locations, but with truth that transcends time and place.

At General Assembly, a committee was tasked with responding to a resolution calling on the church to recognize the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's *Letter from Birmingham City Jail* as a statement of faith. The committee went further, sending a motion to the whole Assembly that King's *Letter* be added to our *Book of Confessions*.

That'll take at least four years to happen, but with Paul having written the epistle to the Philippians from jail, I've had King's letter on my mind all week. King writes:

In a real sense all life is inter-related. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.

Well that got me thinking about another Nobel Peace Prize winner, South African Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Tutu really liked to talk about a concept in his country known as “Ubuntu.” It's a cultural idea that he found dripping with theology. *Ubuntu* refers to the very essence of being a human - compassion, hospitality, vulnerability — that emerges from the fact that we can't exist in isolation. *Ubuntu* is about seeing our interconnectedness: that we are tied together and that everything we do affects others. Tutu would quote a South African

saying: “a person is a person *through* other persons.” When you have *Ubuntu*, you act from that interconnectedness, and it leads you to be more gentle, more patient, more humble. You look to see where there is need before you take for yourself. Where *Ubuntu* thrives, bitterness withers and selfishness is cut away and an ideology like apartheid is unmasked as wretched idolatry.

Paul didn’t know about *Ubuntu*, but it would sound familiar to him: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” Paul wants the Philippians to be “of one mind” and that sounds like a daunting task if you think he wants everyone to agree on everything. Instead, I think he’s looking for a unity among the Philippians that rises out of the humility and concern for others that he prescribes. He wants them to see themselves as one body, inseparable in their life together. And the mindset he wants them to acquire together is the mindset of Christ, described in the ancient Christ Hymn he quotes.

It turns out that all this humility and putting others first isn’t merely what reverends and bishops and apostles think we all ought to do. It’s wrapped up in the very mind of Christ. This hymn tells us who we have gotten ourselves tangled up with: the one who rejected privilege and power in favor of lowness and a holy emptying, who looked at heaven and eternity and chose creatureliness and death. These traits, the Christ hymn asserts, this choice of divine downward mobility, are what make Jesus exalted. Apparently, from its earliest days, the Church has been singing about a different kind of sacred power that flows from a path of putting the greater good above all else.

Saying that someone “has *Ubuntu*” is to offer a great compliment. And even in our individualistic culture, we hold up humility and self-sacrifice as virtues. But, but, but —we want to remind ourselves that success is important and being secure is important and, sure, doing things Jesus’s way might make Paul’s joy complete, but it won’t solve the world’s problems and it certainly won’t help our bottom line.

And then we read that “fear and trembling” piece and it seems to have something to do with letting go of control and we don’t do that very well. And yet it is the call we get from our God and our Savior and the apostles and prophets through the ages.

*Let go of delusions of control. Trust. Think of others first.*

It’s just a hunch, but I really doubt the church members at Philippi ever made Paul’s joy truly complete. But I hope they heard his words from prison and took them to heart. I hope that the words stuck with them, and that it made a difference. I hope that selfish ambition made them twitch and that — despite it being antithetical to the Philippian Dream — they looked out for one another a bit more. I hope they wrestled with this idea of emptying — seeking to empty themselves in service, but not forcing emptiness on anyone else. I hope that they discovered some sense of being closer to God through allowing the mind of Christ to figure out what was best for the community, with concern for one another and the greater good becoming a primary consideration.

If you've hung around Birmingham Presbyterians long enough, you've heard about the Rev. Edward Ramage, who, as pastor of First Presbyterian Church downtown, was one of the eight men to whom the *Letter from Birmingham City Jail* was addressed. Ramage was convicted in the depths of his soul by King's words and threw himself fully into the effort for integration. That split his congregation and he eventually left, but his legacy endures as that church has become a beacon of equality and justice in Birmingham.

*I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.*

*A person is a person through other persons.*

The interconnectedness of the body of Christ is all around us. Opportunities to develop *Ubuntu* abound. I see connection in the beautiful way our denomination equips Presbyterians to do more good together than we could do apart. From big projects like the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance efforts which continue in Puerto Rico to the racial justice collaboration EPC will be doing with a congregation in Louisville in October to the Habitat House our presbytery is helping build this fall, we flourish when we see both the need and the strength in one another and then pick up our checkbooks and hammers and our feet and we put the body of Christ into motion.

Christ calls us to humility, to sacrifice, to hospitality. To rewire our urge to reach for the brass ring in favor of God's own sacred downward mobility. Call it lovingkindness. Call it the working out of salvation with fear and trembling. Call it *Ubuntu*. Pick a name, and then join the work, or create the work, or brainstorm the work — this labor to which the cross leads us. Amen.