



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

December 29, 2013

"Jesus + Nothing = Everything" - Philippians 2:1-11

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I want to start today by telling a story about one of my first trips to Hawaii. This story has become a sermon illustration for my friend Steve Schibsted, who preached here in September at my installation service. He's used this illustration a number of times and has gotten a lot of mileage out of it. And since the story makes me look pretty stupid, I thought I'd at least use it once since it's a sermon illustration that comes at my expense.

At the time, the Schibsteds, Steve, Leslie and their then three-year old son Drew, lived near San Francisco International Airport so we decided that we'd meet at their house. I could park my car there and we could drive over to the airport together.

I like airports. I like airplanes. I don't mind getting to the airport early. Airports are fun places for me. I'm also a guy who likes to minimize unnecessary drama in his life so getting to the airport early is a way to minimize drama.

As I waited for them to finish getting ready, I kept an eye on my watch as it got later and later. Steve saw my growing anxiety and said, "Hey Tim, relax, we're just seven minutes away from the airport. You're going to Hawaii. Let go of that Bay Area angst." I tried to let go of my Bay Area angst but I just got more and more frustrated.

We finally ran out the door, jumped in the Schibsted's car and raced to the airport. We jogged up to the gate to check-in and when we got there the gate agent said, "I'm sorry Mr. Schibsted, we had to give away your seats since you hadn't checked in."

I was thinking to myself, "See, I told you this was going to happen but you wouldn't listen to me. This is what you get when you don't do things the way you should."

The gate agent told us to have a seat and she would see what she could do. She said that getting on this flight did not look good. As we sat there, we watched most of the people board the plane. Finally, the gate agent paged us. We walked up to the counter and she said, "I'm sorry but the economy section has checked in full but we do have four seats together in Business class. Would that work for you?"

Would that work for us? I think it would work out just fine. But what would we have to pay to fly in Business class to Hawaii? The gate agent said, "We're just going to give you a complimentary upgrade."

All of a sudden I had a conflict of emotions. On the one hand, I had never been in Business class and would gladly

take those seats. But on the other hand, I was frustrated because this was just going to encourage Steve to continue to fly by the seat of his pants.

As I looked back on that story I realized that I was living out the parable of the Prodigal Son where Steve was the younger brother and I was the older brother.

When Steve tells this story he talks about the feelings he had as we sat in Business class on our way to Hawaii. As we sat in plush seats and the flight attendants served us drinks and an amazing lunch, Steve says he felt compelled to confess to the cabin crew, "Hey, you know what? I didn't pay for any of this. I really don't deserve any of what you're doing for me. In fact, I blew it. It was my fault that we were late to the airport. I shouldn't be sitting here in Business class."

That experience is what the Bible calls grace. And that's what I want to talk with you about this morning as we look at Philippians chapter 2.

God is a God of the mountains. He's also the God of the valleys and He's the God of the raging seas. But I do think God is particularly passionate about mountains.

I was up on a mountain that God gave Moses ten commandments to guide His people into the best life they could possibly have. When God gave Moses those commandments He was telling Moses and His people, "I'm the one who set you free from your captivity in Egypt. Here are ten ways for you and your people to continue to live a truly free life."

Well, we know they didn't follow God's prescription for freedom and neither have we. So, it was also on a very humble little hill just outside Jerusalem that Jesus gave His life on a cross so that the world might live.

I love the mountains. I love climbing them and I love standing on top of them. Whether you rock climb to the top of Cathedral Peak near Yosemite National Park in California or drive to the top of Haleakala on Maui, the view from up there is like no other. There is nothing above you but sky and the whole earth seems to unfold beneath you. There is a perspective you get from up on top of a mountain that you just can't get when you're in a valley.

There are a number of theological peaks in the New Testament. Romans chapter 8, verse 1 is certainly one of those theological summits. The apostle Paul tells us in that verse that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. No condemnation of any sort. And here in Philippians chapter two, we're on top of another one of those theological summits.

Paul wrote this letter to his friends in Philippi from a Roman jail. It's interesting to me that Paul leads us to this theological mountaintop from the valley of a prison. Paul knew from personal

experience that God can meet us anywhere, even in our personal valleys.

When Paul was incarcerated in Rome, Rome was an extremely intense and dangerous place to be, particularly for a follower of Jesus Christ. Nero was Emperor when Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians. Tacitus, the Roman historian, accused Nero of starting the infamous fire that burned much of the city of Rome.

To cover his tracks, Nero blamed the fire on this small but growing community of people who called themselves Christians. That's the hostile environment Paul finds himself in as he writes this letter to this church he loves. He's facing execution because he believes that God has come to earth in Jesus Christ and has made a way for all of humanity to be reconciled to God.

God was at work in the middle of Paul's difficulties. Paul was absolutely confident of that. The reason Paul can live with peace, courage and confidence is because he has settled a very important question in his life. He has a definition of life itself that enables him to face whatever difficulties come his way. It's the way he defines his life that enables him to stand no matter what happens to him.

As he says in chapter 1, for him, living is Christ, knowing Christ, loving Christ and most importantly, being loved by Christ. That is what life is all about for Paul. That's Paul's unshakeable definition of life and he's going to unpack that definition here in chapter 2.

I've borrowed the title of this sermon from a book written by Tullian Tchividjian. He's the

pastor of Coral Gables Presbyterian Church in Florida. His full name is William Graham Tullian Tchividjian. He's the grandson of Billy Graham, the famous evangelist. Tullian has written a number of books, including one entitled Jesus + Nothing = Everything. He wrote this book because he realized how easy it is for all of us to lose track of what the Christian life is all about.

The apostle Paul knew what the Christian life was all about. And because he did, he was a free man even when shackled in a Roman prison. Paul had an anchor that held him securely through the storms of his life.

What Paul knew was simply and profoundly this: as far as his standing with God was concerned it was Jesus plus nothing and that was everything to Paul. It wasn't his good works outweighing his bad deeds that made Paul right with God. What Paul discovered was it was what Jesus had done for him plus nothing else that fundamentally mattered. A lot of people inside and outside the church don't really understand that. We still think it is up to us to get ourselves right with God. That's not the message of the gospel.

Tullian said this in a recent interview, "If we're not careful we can give people the impression that Christianity is first and foremost about the sacrifice we make for Jesus rather than the sacrifice Jesus made for us; our performance for him rather than his performance for us; our obedience for him rather than his obedience for us. The hub of Christianity is not "do something for Jesus." The hub of Christianity is "Jesus has done everything for you."

What I've learned...is that the Bible is not a record of the blessed good, but rather the blessed bad. The Bible is not a witness to the best people making it up to God; it's a witness to God making it down to the worst people. The Bible is one long story of God meeting our rebellion with his rescue; our sin with his salvation; our failure with his favor; our guilt with his grace; our badness with his goodness."

So, if we read (or preach) the Bible asking first, "What would Jesus do?" instead of asking, "What has Jesus done" we'll miss the good news that alone can set us free."¹

I don't know whether this is true for you but I know it can be for me. I have a built in resistance to grace. Grace is what the Apostle Paul and Tullian Tchividjian are talking about. I resist grace. I'm wired up to take care of myself. I don't like admitting that I need help. Many of us also resist coming to Christ because we're not interested in a God who might challenge our opinions and convictions. We hate anyone telling us what to do, most of the time. But grace offends us even more because it tells us that there's nothing we can do, that everything has already been done for us in Jesus Christ. And if there's something we hate more than being told what to do, it's being told that we can't do anything to secure our salvation except to receive God's gift of mercy.

As far as our standing with God is concerned, the Gospel tells us that it is Jesus plus nothing and that equals everything. That's the arithmetic of the Christian faith.

That amazing truth is what Paul built his life upon. That set him free from constantly focusing on what he had done or had not done. He focused instead on what Jesus Christ had already done for him and was doing for him. And that focus changed his life. That focus set him free. That focus anchored him and enabled him to face the storms of his life. It's what Jesus has done for the world that he unpacks here in Philippians chapter 2.

Let's take a look at verses 5-11. In these seven verses we have the ones and zeros of the Christian faith. If you're a computer geek, you know what that means. Computer software is built on ones and zeros. Every piece of software you love using, the applications that help you surf the internet or be productive at work or help you listen to the great music, is written with in a code that uses only ones and zeros. Ones and zeros are the building blocks of our modern technological world.

To change my metaphor, here in verses 5-11 we have the musical notes that create the great symphony of life, the way it is supposed to be. If we want to understand what human life is really all about, we need to understand what is being said right here on this theological summit. That's the bold claim of this passage. If we begin to understand what Paul is saying in Philippians chapter 2 and if we allow this truth to begin to permeate our lives, we will begin to lock on to what life is all about.

We are on the high ground of the New Testament. This is the

ultimate revelation of who Jesus is and what He did and why He did it. There is so much we could mine from these verses but we're just going to focus on a couple of points in verses 5-11. One of the most important things that happens in these verses is that we not only see what Jesus Christ has done, we get an intimate picture into His mind. That is crucial for those of us who are followers of Jesus because, as Paul says in verse four, his goal for the Philippians and for us is that we would have the mind of Christ in us.

This passage unveils this mystery of the Son of God's motivations for coming to earth. This passage gives us a picture of those motivations in order to transform our motivations and reorient the way we look at others, the world and ourselves. We are given this picture of the mind of Christ to change us.

Here are three mind-blowing assertions made in this passage. First Jesus Christ, the child in the manger, is God. Second, God became a human being, and third Jesus Christ is a servant.

Here's the theological high ground. Let's climb to the pinnacle and take a look at the view.

*Philippians 2:5 "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. "*

No passage in the Bible presents the claim that Jesus is God more clearly and dramatically than this one.

¹ See the full interview at: <http://jonathanmerritt.religionnews.com/2013/10/02/tullian-tchividjian>

Who, though He was in the form of God did not regard equality with God something to be exploited” or grasped, as some translation have it. The Greek word translated with the English word “form” is the word: “morphe”.

When I hear the word “form” I think of a thing’s outward appearance. But that’s not what that Greek word means. “Morphe” means the inner reality that makes something what it actually is. Jesus Christ is the very substance and being of God. “He did not consider equality with God something to hold on to.” He wasn’t in a hot pursuit to be God-like. He was God.

That’s what Paul is saying here. Jesus wasn’t grasp-ing after God. He was God. And He was willing to empty Himself of His glory to personally enter the human story. That is an amazing picture of the heart of God.

So if this is true, that Jesus Christ is God in human flesh, if Jesus Christ is the God who comes to the rescue, how should this reality impact OUR minds? How should it change the way we think about our lives? If Jesus is God, if He has come into our lives, then there is every reason to look at what we’re going through right now and look to the future with great confidence and hope. Who is this one who says He’s committed Himself to us? It’s the God we meet in Jesus Christ, who has come into our lives. I’m not in this life on my own but the one who gave Himself away for my benefit is in my life.

Secondly, God became a human being in Jesus of Nazareth.

Phil 2:5 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.

9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

God the Son took on the very form of a servant (once again that’s the Greek word “morphe”). He didn’t just put on our humanity and act like a servant like we put on a suit of clothes. He became a human being exactly like us. Jesus didn’t discard His divinity to take on humanity. Jesus continued to be God as He took on humanity. Because God took on humanity He knows what it’s like, from personal experience, to be us.

Finally, Jesus Christ came to our planet to serve us because God is a servant. Jesus lived as a servant because that is who He has been from all eternity. He could have come as a king, or some other powerful person, demanding that others serve Him. He didn’t. He came as a servant because that is who He is. His career path does not look like our career paths. His approach to life is utterly different than most of ours.

Here comes the counter-intuitive vision of the Gospel. Jesus followed the pathway down in service to others and God

exalted Him. That’s the pathway of the Christ-follower. We go down in order to go up. We go down on our knees, acknowledging our need for what only Jesus Christ can do for us and when we do God lifts us up. We go down in service of others in order to lift them up and you know what, when we do that God lifts us up. It’s completely counter-intuitive. We go down to go up.

When Paul redefined his life, when he focused the definition of his life not on his circumstances but on knowing this Jesus who emptied Himself for us, when he focused his life on loving Christ and being loved by Jesus Christ, it was then that he was a truly free man whose life was anchored, stable, steady even in the middle of great personal storms.

God the Son emptied Himself of His divine glory. He became a human being and came to serve us because that is who He is in His essence. Our God is a servant.

Frederick Buechner, one of my favorite authors has written, “Once we have seen God in a stable, we never know where we might see him again. If God is present in this least auspicious place, there is no place or time so lowly or earthbound but that holiness can be present, too. For just when God seems the most helpless, God is the most strong; and just were we least expect him that he comes most fully.”

Jesus plus nothing else equals everything. That is what the Bible calls grace.

Here at the end of 2013 and as we stand at the beginning of a new year, do you know that God loves you like this? Jesus Christ has done everything for you.

There is nothing you need to do to be right with God but to accept His forgiveness, His mercy, His grace and His love in Jesus Christ.

Tullian Tchividjian said this is what he discovered, "...because Jesus was strong for me, I was free to be weak; because Jesus was extraordinary, I was free to be ordinary; because Jesus succeeded for me, I was free to fail..." Do you believe that?

Do you know that is true for you today? The Son of God stepped out of heaven; He became a human being like you and me in order to serve us by rescuing us and offering us everlasting life as a gift.

I always find the view from the mountaintop more surprising and more spectacular than I even imagined. We're standing on one of the theological summits of the Christian faith. What are you going to do with what you've seen from up here? My hope is that you will say, "Yes" to Jesus Christ for the first time or once again as we get ready to start this new year. Say, "Yes" to Him. He is saying "Yes" to you.