

## **Down to Earth**

Philippians 2:1-13      Crossroads Christian Church  
Matthew 21:23-32      September 28, 2014 Pentecost 16A

Once upon a time, two young men grew up in an inner city neighborhood, both the sons of immigrants. Although one was Catholic and the other Jewish, they were best friends. Both were devout, and as they grew up, both entered the religious life, one as a priest, the other as a rabbi. One day, the priest called his friend and said, "We have to celebrate! I've been given a promotion. I'm going to be a monsignor." So they walked into a bar—no that's another joke. Over wine, the priest described what his promotion meant in terms of power and prestige. The rabbi shrugged. "Is that the best you can do?" "Well, no, a few of the monsignors get elected bishop, and rule over large numbers of churches. The rabbi shrugged. "Is that the best you can do?" "No, a few bishops get named archbishop and rule over even more churches." The rabbi shrugged. "Is that the best you can do?" The priest was getting frustrated. "Some archbishops become cardinals." The rabbi shrugged. "Is that the best you can do?" "The Cardinals choose one of their rank to be Pope, Christ's vicar on earth, ruler of the whole church." The rabbi shrugged. "Is that the best you can do?" Totally exasperated, the priest yelled, "What do you expect me to do? Become Jesus Christ?" The rabbi shrugged and said, "One of our boys made it." That's a lesson in humility.

But let's get serious. Humility is a virtue in the Bible. Jesus does say, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." That stands in contrast to our tramp-over-one-another-to-get-ahead culture, where we watch

out for number one, where the emphasis on being more wealthy, more beautiful, and more powerful than those around us, humility almost seems like a character deficit; a sign of a loser. We may think of a humble person as always self-effacing, always looking down and mumbling, fearful of being noticed. In truth, humility doesn't mean groveling in self-loathing. At its best, it means not seeing yourself as better than others, but having a realistic sense of who you are. It involves respect for one's self and just as much respect for others. It actually comes from an old English word *humus*, meaning earth, or ground—not as groveling in the dirt, but in the sense of being grounded—or, as my sermon title suggests, being “down to earth.”

When Paul wrote to the Philippians, he talks about humility, this kind of being “down to earth,” when he says, “Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others,” but he also talks about another kind of “down to earth”—how Jesus Christ became our example, by putting aside the glory of heaven to come “down to earth” to become the Messiah.

The words are important—they may have been quoted from an early Christian hymn or statement of belief. Hear them again.

Though he was in the form of God,

he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.

<sup>7</sup> But he emptied himself

by taking the form of a slave

and by becoming like human beings.

When he found himself in the form of a human,

<sup>8</sup> he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the

point of death,

even death on a cross.

<sup>9</sup> Therefore, God highly honored him

and gave him a name above all names,

<sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus everyone

in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow

<sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is

Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philip. 2:6-11 CEB)

And, of course, Paul, being Paul, has a “therefore”—

one of his favorite words. If Christ did this, therefore, we

should live according to Christ’s purposes. In a top-down

world, where your rank in society started with the

Caesars and went down layer by layer until finally you

got to the slaves, God turned everything over topsy-turvy

by sending his Son who would humble himself to the

point of death so that we might share in his glory. No

matter who you are, you are of infinite worth in God’s

eyes.

Let’s move on to our Gospel lesson. The chief priests

and elders who challenged Jesus were definitely of the

top-down variety. For them, scriptural authority was from

the Torah, the law of Moses. The priests who officiated at

the ceremonies were the most important and powerful

people. (Of course, the Romans, pagans though they

were, held the governing power and the military power.)

The legal scholars who interpreted how the Jewish law

applied in specific situations had authority, but their

authority depended upon other great scholars who had

interpreted the laws before them. Ask a teacher or lawyer

by what authority he made a teaching or a decision, and

he would carefully quote the scholars who came before.

Then came Pharisees, lay people who so loved the law

that they lived to the same standards as the priests.

And so the pyramid went downward to women, children, and slaves.

So it's not surprising that the Jewish leaders would ask this upstart from some hick town in the north, "By what authority do you say and do these things?"

And of course, Jesus being Jesus, turned the question back on them. "I have a question for you. If you tell me the answer, I'll tell you what kind of authority I have to do these things. Where did John get his authority to baptize? Did he get it from heaven or from humans?"

That put them on the spot. They didn't accept that John the Baptist had divine authority, but the crowds did. They were afraid of the crowds, so they copped out. "We don't know." So Jesus said that he didn't have to tell them the source of his authority. He knew that they wouldn't have accepted it anyway.

So Jesus lobbed another shot into their court. His story started out in a familiar way—a father had two sons—remember Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau? The father in Jesus' story asked his first son and he refused. He asked the other son, who said "yes, certainly, Father, whatever you wish." But the first son had a change of heart and went out to help. The second son kept playing on his Game Boy. So who did his father's will? Sound simple, but is it?

The authorities had to admit that ultimately it was the son who changed his mind and did the work that did his Father's will. But they must have gritted their teeth when they said it. For they knew that for Jesus they were all talk and no action. They said they were doing God's will, but they didn't go out and do it. Others, those sinners who had responded to John the Baptist's call to repent and be baptized, tax collectors and prostitutes

who had answered Jesus' call to follow him, they were the ones who had originally broken the laws, had said no to God, but now they were the ones that were doing God's will. Instead of appealing to the authority of the hierarchy, Jesus was appealing to the authority of love; of accepting God's grace and love.

Four times in Matthew's gospel Jesus tells his disciples to do his Father's will. And later in the week after this encounter with the authorities, Jesus will be praying on the Mount of Olives, "Father, let your will, not mine, be done."

It isn't where we rank on the totem pole. It isn't how many friends we have on Facebook. It isn't what kind of car we drive or house we own, or how successful our children are. Jesus wants us to do his Father's—our heavenly Father's will. And that takes us back to what Paul urged the Christians to do—don't set yourselves above one another, but work together in love and harmony to live as Christ would have us live—to love as Christ would have us love.

Roger Lovette wrote in *Christian Century*<sup>i</sup>

"In every church I have served I still remember a few particular names and faces. Sometimes these are people who could not pray in public and were not comfortable teaching Sunday school. Some would not even serve on committees. Some had little formal education. But they were the ones with a casserole, the ones writing me a note when I needed it the most, the ones taking folks who didn't own cars to the grocery store, and the ones whispering as they took my hand at the back door, "I pray for you every day." In other words, the down-to-earth people who are God's favorites.

The God who came down to earth in Jesus Christ invites us to be down to earth. To love, to serve, to lift, to laugh, to weep, to work, to make true what we pray every Sunday—"Thy Kingdom Come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Roger Lovette, "Showing Up," *Christian Century*, September 20, 2005, p. 20. Quoted in Religion-online.org.