

The scripture today from Philippians is a section of a letter Paul wrote to one of his beloved churches. As many of you know, this was a time of persecution for those who claimed Christ as the ruler over their lives and not Caesar as their ruler. The church in Philippi was in partnership with Paul, financially and in living the gospel. Paul wrote this letter for a number of specific reasons. One reason, Paul extended thankfulness for a gift from the church, for their support of him. He also wrote the church because he received word that there were possible issues of disunity. We are not certain exactly what was going on in the church to cause a disunity. Perhaps the church board was at odds with the worship committee in the song choices. Perhaps they thought the order of worship should be rearranged, or that more inclusive language be used during the liturgy. Perhaps the Stewardship committee disagreed with the Building and Property committee that funds were better used in purchasing a new organ, or a new projection system, or better mics for the choir...or that the Hospitality Committee thought there should be a coffee and donuts gathering before church. We just don't know what the divisions in the Philippian church were. What we do know is that Paul calls the church to unity and appeals to the humble nature of Christ. Specifically, Paul challenges the church to "do all things without murmurings and disputes" and to "be of the same mind". And even though there is great suffering in Philippi because of the Roman persecution of the church, Paul also calls upon the members to look to the example of Christ, to come unity, suffer for the cause of the gospel, keep strong under persecution, and to live a life where Jesus Christ is their King and not Caesar.

But this doesn't make much sense to me. Caesar, a strong and powerful ruler, lives a life of luxury because he exerts his authority over others. When I think of a King, I think of someone like Caesar. But Paul reminds us that it is Jesus Christ who is the King. And Jesus isn't powerful or wealthy or ever lived a life of comfort, let alone luxury. No, Paul said that

Jesus was obedient and humble. Paul claims that the problem the church in Philippi was having was because they were not unified. Paul says that we must treat each other better than we treat ourselves because that is the example Jesus gave us. Are these two words we really, really want to model? Humble? Obedient? We value independence and to be strong. We live in a society that teaches us that we are supposed to look out for ourselves, to get what we can, to buy the bigger house, drive the newest car, definitely not the old minivan, and that as an American, we are to value rugged individualism. How many times have we heard, “You just need to pick yourself up with your bookstraps”? How many times have you heard, be strong, guard yourself, never let them see you sweat? We think that to be strong is to not make mistakes, but if we do, fix it before others find out. We need to be perfect. And if we are perfect, maybe, just maybe we can keep others from judging us, criticizing us or being blamed by others. We desperately strive for perfection. We even hear our own voices saying, “If our church was just big enough...or if we could just get the wealthy family in the city we could have enough...or if our pastor was just lived closer...or if the church’s music was just more contemporary or traditional enough...or if our church had better facilities we could attract more than enough...or if we could just work a little harder...or if we could (fill in the blank - whatever) everything would be perfect.” Well, here’s the problem. In trying to be perfect, seeking out security, or trying to be invincible, we are actually causing damaging by using shame. When we try to do everything on our own, all we are doing is causing guilt and shame to take over. It has been said, that wherever perfectionism is driving, shame is riding shotgun. Shame is *the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging*. It crushes our tolerance for vulnerability, thereby killing engagement, innovation, creativity, productivity, and trust. And worst of all, if we don't know what we're looking for, shame can

ravage our church before we see one outward sign of a problem. Shame is not obvious. But it can look like blaming, gossiping, favoritism, parking lot committee meetings, excluding others, name-calling, and harassment. Shame can only rise so far before people disengage to protect themselves. When we're disengaged, we don't show up, we don't contribute, and we stop caring. When churches shame people enough, they just stop showing up.

Christ teaches us, the church, how to live in community without shame, guilt or blame. This is done when we decide to put the good for all before the individual good of oneself...to change our individualist mentality, to one where we think of the community. In Philippians, Paul calls upon the church to reflect upon Christ and to live in unity with one mind and one spirit. The church in Philippi, beloved by Paul, is struggling during their formation of finding unity. Paul calls upon them to remember it is Christ who exemplifies how unity is accomplished within the church. This can only be achieved when the good for the community is valued higher than the need of the individual. The spirit of humility by emptying oneself brings unity, for the greater glory of God. Paul's use of repetition emphasizes exactly what he calls the church in Philippi to do to become unified. He tells them they are to comfort, encourage, fellowship, have affection and compassion for each other. Paul tells us that we must be "in one spirit, in one mind", "thinking the same things", "having the same love", "united in spirit". We are not to have selfish ambition and conceit, but to be live humbly and treating others better than ourselves. We must consider other people first.

But how in the world can we do this? According to Paul, we must follow the example of Christ. Christ is in a high place (Heaven) and moves to a lower place (Earth), dying a humiliating death on a cross. But then, God does something amazing with Jesus' humility. God

takes Jesus from the lowest of the low and moves Jesus an even higher place than before, from death to Earth then Heaven

The salvation act of Christ and the giving of his physical body also is a model for the church in how they will enter into the new kingdom, and this is all for the glory of God.

Paul is saying that the action of giving of oneself moves the church from being comprised of individuals to a place of a unified body with one mind and one spirit as in Christ. By acting as a church in this way and by Jesus as the obedient servant, God is glorified.

But how in the world are we supposed to treat others better than we treat ourselves?

There's a game Sophia likes to play. She throws her blanket over her shoulders and runs through the house, yelling that she's a Super Hero. The beauty of her imagination is that she loves to pretend to fly, but keeps running into things like the sofa, tables, even the dog. She made me think, no one is perfect and shouldn't be expected to be. That's just an impossible expectation for anyone. So, in our family, we have all made up our own, less than perfect, Superheros. Cousin Reece, is called Super Reece, the protector of all things stuffed. This includes teddy bears, pillows, and family members after one of mom's home cooked meals. Cousin Moriah is Super Moriah, the girl who can keep the balloon from touching the ground. Grandpa is Super Grandpa, the man whose laugh cannot be heard. Grandma will be Super Granny, the grandma who hugs too much. Sophia is also known as Super Sophia, the girl who can dance without music. Our little Justice League of Super Heroes is one you've probably never seen before.

But if you think about it, superheroes are not invincible, no they all have some imperfection. Superman has...kryptonite and Wolverine has a temper. But they also have an

amazing gift for putting others first. Superman is willing to jump tall buildings or stop a train to save others. Batman is willing to fight criminals to save the citizens of Gotham City.

So I challenge you today church to become a Justice League of Superheroes. Not to be invincible, no one can do that. Rather, to think of others. That means we must not shame each other. Rather, our superpower is to be vulnerable and open to others. To be a superhero, you must be vulnerable. You must be willing to walk in someone else's shoes to understand them better. You have to be brave enough to ask for help, to admit mistakes, to learn from failures, to support each other. We need church superheroes who want to learn, want to connect with others.

We need Superheroes who know that being vulnerable and authentic with each other is worth it, because it leads to love, belonging, joy, creativity...all things that give purpose to our church. Being a part of our League of Superheroes at this church is to be in relationship with each other, a relationship of openness and honesty, where the needs of each other are expressed and we find connections with each other. We must live as a whole-hearted people, striving for love and connection.

Do you want to join the Justice League of Superheroes at Crossroads Christian Church? It's pretty simple because we already have our model of a Superhero in Christ. Be humble, be obedient, be vulnerable with each other as Christ taught us, with all glory going to God.