

Title: The Christ Hymn  
Text: Philippians 2: 1 – 11  
Date: October 1, 2017

While I acknowledged that last week's message was hardly a traditional "sermon," I'll try to be a bit more conventional this week. Last week I selected a text for the occasion, and this week we are back to following the lectionary. Interestingly enough, though, this text may well have been one that I might have chosen as a fitting next step.

I am going to start by appealing to your head, but I hope to end up by appealing to your heart. I am going to start with some grand abstractions, but hope to end up with how this might mess with the way you live.

First, some far out stuff that might also introduce you further to the way I think. Frequently we hear people talk about Jesus Christ as though that were his first and last name, even though technically I think we know better. Most of us know that Jesus is a name and that Christ is actually a title. So then, it would technically be more proper to say Jesus *the Christ*.

So why do I bother highlighting this? It has become increasingly important in my mind to separate the two. We appropriately spend a lot of time talking about the life and teachings of Jesus, but it has been increasingly important to me to lift up the Christ – what a handful of theologians speak of as the Cosmic Christ. While I don't always use that phraseology, I always use the thought behind it – that there is a Cosmic Christ that has been there from the beginning, that informs all, that infuses all, within whom all things hold together. While Paul reflects this thinking in a handful of other places, and it is reflected in some of the apocryphal books, it is reflected on most beautifully in the first chapter of John where we read:

**"In the beginning was the Word [the Cosmic Christ], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.**

**The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.**

**"And the Word became flesh and lived among us . . ." (John 1: 1 - 3, 9, 14)**

I don't want to get too far afield now, but being clear on this is important to me theologically. It is important to me as I dialogue with people of other faith traditions. It is important to me in my personal spiritual practice. While it may sound airy-fairy to you, it is the air that I breathe.

Paul runs on a parallel track this morning when he quotes a hymn that says, **"though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself... being born in human likeness."** (Phil. 2:6-7)

I just bet that some of you smart people know that *kenosis* is the Greek word that it used for *emptying* himself... being born in human likeness. So then this emptying oneself is descriptive not only of Jesus the Christ, but is also descriptive of the very nature of God. Beginning and end, *kenosis* is the essential characteristic of the biblical God. (This could be a fascinating aside, but at this point I imagine a Buddhist walking into the room and saying, "Excuse me, but we talk about emptying ourselves as well.")

While I alluded to this earlier, it is generally accepted that verses 6 – 11 of this passage were not Paul's original words, but he was quoting a recognized hymn or poem of the time. It is worth noting that some of our best God-talk comes not as theological bullet points, but as poetry – our best efforts at expressing the inexpressible, at grasping the mystery of faith.

Many preachers make a very common mistake when expounding on this passage, and I too just made it. We tend to get too theological. We tend to get stuck in our head, when the over-arching theme of this passage is intended to address how we live. You might say it is a call to *kenotic* living. We are transitioning now from head to real life stuff.

Paul's argument begins in Philippians 1 where he says he wants us **"to discern what is best."** (Phil.1:10) Between then and this section we read earlier, he talks about various things that could distract and divert us from pursuing that which is best. And then in the opening verses of chapter 2 he says *this is what is best*: **"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God... emptied himself."** (Phil. 2:5-7)

After having been here all of one week, I have picked up on a phrase you like to use. You talk about doing something **"in the way and Spirit of Jesus."** If that then is what you are all about, this is a beautiful passage to reflect on. Paul's rhetorical purpose is primarily to give a *pattern of thinking and living* for believers in Philippi -- one grounded in the way of Jesus. It builds on the appeal from the first chapter to **"live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.** (Phil 1:27-30) For example, **"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit." "Look to the interests of others."** (Phil 2: 2-4)

This could be a wonderful focal point for us on this World Communion Sunday. Hear these words addressed to the church at Philippi as words to us as part of the church worldwide. **"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."** Perhaps you could personalize it even more. As you stand in the aisle awaiting your turn to receive the elements, perhaps you could silently repeat to yourself, **"May I have the mind of Christ. May I have the mind of Christ. May I have the mind of Christ."**

If you choose to do so, be well aware that these are dangerous words. This is not a call to have the intellect and debating skills of Jesus. This is a call to living in the *kenotic* way of Jesus the Christ. We don't make an intellectual decision to live ethical lives. We live ethical lives because we have taken on the mind of Christ who empties himself by nature. Do you hear the difference? The distinction is critical!

And as I intimated a moment ago, this can have dangerous implications. The Christ Hymn that Paul references reminds us clearly that Jesus, **"humbled himself and**

**became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.”** (Phil. 2:8) Beyond remembering this intellectually, this is what resonates with our spirit when we hear the words **“this is my body, broken for you.”** **“This is my blood shed for you.”** Beyond remembering an event of 2,000 years ago, our spirit is be awakened to the call to *kenotic* living – to emptying ourselves.

Bottom line, when *kenosis* hits real life, one either compromises by prioritizing survival concerns, or one gets crucified. We have the example of Oscar Romero. We have the example of Martin Luther King, Jr. For most of us it may not come to making this ultimate sacrifice, but make no mistake. Some cross always happens when *kenosis* meets real life. If we understand this clearly, perhaps there is a sense in which we will live out our calling in **“fear and trembling.”** (Phil. 2:12)

So be sober in your thinking, but also be encouraged. Paul concludes by reminding us that, **“it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”** (Phil. 2:13) This is not a demand to be clever. This is an invitation to **“let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”**

Amen.

### **Philippians 2: 1 – 13**

**2** If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, <sup>1</sup>make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>2</sup>Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>3</sup>Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. <sup>4</sup>Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

<sup>5</sup>who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,

<sup>6</sup>but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

<sup>7</sup> he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.

<sup>8</sup>Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,

<sup>9</sup>so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

<sup>10</sup>and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out [live out] your own salvation with fear and trembling; <sup>13</sup>for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.