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The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Today's sermon is taken from Philippians, chapter 2, verses 1-13.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

First of all this morning, before I begin my sermon, I'd ask that we try to clear our heads of the Red Sox. As I finished up this sermon late last night, I was still trying to clear my head of the Red Sox. I mean, it's just been all encompassing the last couple of weeks, but we need to clear our heads.

A woman named Naomi tells about her six-year-old grandson, Joshua. Joshua attended a vacation Bible school with the theme "What would Jesus do?" To remind the children of the theme they made little arm bands with "What would Jesus do? -- WWJD" on the band. One evening Joshua was asked by his mother to change his clothes. Joshua looked at his arm band and said, "WWJD -- What would Jesus do?" And his mother replied that she thought Jesus would do what his mother asked him to do and change his clothes. Joshua thought for a moment and then remarked, "I don't know. Jesus seems to be wearing the same clothes in every picture I see of him." Well, maybe that's true. There's a lot about Jesus we do not know. Of course, children are always going to see something in a story that you and I do not.

On Saturdays the custom at the Erickson house is for Ken Erickson's wife to clean out leftovers from the refrigerator. One Saturday she gave the one remaining portion of tortellini to their six-year-old son Jeremy. However, their eight-year-old son Matthew also wanted some of the tortellini, so bickering ensued. After several unsuccessful attempts to mediate the dispute, Ken decided on a theological approach. Hoping to convince Jeremy to share his portion with Matthew, he said, "Jeremy, what would Jesus do in this situation?" Jeremy, perhaps thinking about the feeding of the five thousand, immediately responded, "Oh Dad, he would just make more."

And maybe in this case Jeremy's right. Theologians warn us against trying to speculate too glibly about what Jesus would do in any given situation. After studying Jesus' parables in depth, I think that the only reliable answer to the question, "What would Jesus do?" can be summed up in two words: Something unexpected. Yet, the question is an important one.

St. Paul writing in today's epistle from Philippians almost requires us to ask the WWJD question. He writes, "Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and one in mind, doing nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, rather in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests, but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus."

In other words, to think and to act like Jesus; have the same mindset as Jesus, we are to do as Jesus would do. Now, what would Jesus do? I think Paul gives us some definite clues. Paul begins with Jesus' humility. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit," he writes, "rather in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others."

Obviously, St. Paul didn't take any self esteem training: Value others above yourselves. That flies in the face of everything we are teaching our kids today. What is it that Whitney Houston sang a few years ago? "I found the greatest love of all inside of me. The greatest love of all is easy to achieve. Learning to love yourself; it is the greatest love of all."

Even in church we say, "You have to love yourself before you can love others." Doesn't St. Paul understand that? Of course he does. But he also understands that human beings by nature are self centered. Nobody really has to tell us to love ourselves. Of course, there are some people who need to learn to stand up for themselves. Some people allow themselves to be subjected to all kinds of abuse because of their unwillingness to assert themselves; but do not confuse this with humility. In the book *God's Little Lessons for Leaders* there's a story about a man who is driving down a country road when he came to a narrow bridge. In front of the bridge was a sign that read "yield" and seeing no oncoming cars the man continued to cross the bridge on to his destination. On his way back along the same route

the man came to the same one-lane bridge from the opposite direction. To his surprise he saw another “yield” sign posted there. “Curious,” he thought, “I’m sure there was a sign posted on the other side.” And sure enough when he reached the other side of the bridge and looked back he saw the sign. Yield signs had been placed at both ends of the bridge so that the drivers from both directions would give each other the right-of-way. Now, that appears to be a reasonable way to prevent a head-on collision, but what it really is is a recipe for paralysis. Suppose that two cars approach the bridge at the same time. If they both obeyed the law, neither of them would move forward. There would be a perpetual stalemate. We need to apply our reason here, but we also want to recognize the danger of both cars trying to cross the bridge at the same time. Somebody has to yield.

In another book *Good to Great* business writer Jim Collins explored the difference between some companies he defined as good companies, and other companies he defined as great companies. His question was what are the differences between good companies and great companies. The leaders shared at least one trait -- humility. To use his language, “When things were going well, the great leaders looked out the window and saw the team succeeding. When things were not going well, the great leader would look in the mirror and see himself or herself and ask, ‘What am I missing?’”

When St. Paul looked at Jesus, I believe the first thing he saw was Jesus’ humility. Do you understand how important humility is to anyone who would do something of lasting value? Christian thinkers always rated pride or hubris to be the original and most serious of the seven deadly sins, and the source of the other sins. Why? Because pride leads invariably, not only to the swelling of one’s own ego, but also the loathing of others. Dictators rule from pride. Leaders lead from humility.

Humility, I think, is an essential characteristic of a leader. Now imagine the power of humility in the Son of God. It surely took Paul’s breath away to realize that the Messiah, the very Son of God, had humbled himself in behalf of sinful humanity. He writes about it in the rest of today’s epistle from Philippians:

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider

equality with God something to be used to his own advantage. Rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

This passage from Philippians is magnificent. The Son of God humbled himself on our behalf. What would Jesus do? To answer that question I think you must begin with humility. And if you want to live as Jesus lived, you must be willing to look beyond your own needs to the needs of others. This does not mean that you loathe yourself -- I don't think Jesus loathed himself -- of course not! But in contrast to the rest of humanity, Jesus did not live just for himself; he lived and died for you and me.

Jack Kelley is a reporter for *USA Today*, and he told a story of a ravaging famine in Somalia, East Africa. In a village decimated by starvation, a photographer noticed a little boy suffering from malnutrition. When the photographer handed a grapefruit to the little boy, he was so weak that he couldn't even handle the grapefruit. A member of the crew cut it in half and gave it to him. He picked it up, and he looked as if to say, “thanks,” and he walked back toward his village. There on the ground was another little boy, the first boy's younger brother who appeared to be dead, his eyes completely glazed over, his older brother knelt down, and he bit off a piece of the grapefruit and chewed it for a moment. He then opened up his younger brother's mouth, put the chewed piece in and worked his brother's jaws up and down. Later the news crew learned that the older boy had done that same routine for about two weeks until he himself had finally died of malnutrition. The younger brother survived. Now, I think, wouldn't you love to have a brother like that? And, you know, you do.

I read that there are four rules by which we live:

- The iron rule: Do to others before they do to you.
- The silver rule: Do to others as they do to you.
- The golden rule: Do to others as you would have them do to you.
- The titanium rule: Do to others as Jesus has done to you.

There's the rule that each of us should strive for. Now, this does not mean

living your life as a Christian doormat. It simply means valuing the welfare of others at least as much as you value your own life. I believe that that is the definition of courage. I believe that that is what it means to be a hero in this world. I believe that is what it means to have the mindset of Jesus who made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness; and being found in appearance of a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

“Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.”

What would Jesus do? He would do what was good for everyone concerned, not just himself. I challenge you to go, to do likewise.

Amen

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs