

For it is God Who is Working in You!

September 27th, 2020 Scriptures: Matthew 21:23-32; Philippians 2:1-13

Coming to the end of one's ministry can be a challenge. At least it is proving to be so for me. Not only are there logistical details that continue to be needed, both by church and by family, but to put the final stamp of one's life long career in place and lay it out for everyone to see represents a significant challenge to the heart. I'm not specifically speaking about my physical heart, although I could, but rather I'm speaking about the emotional element that I makes us all human, and certainly makes me human as I experience the last several weeks that I will actively be your pastor.

I've thought about putting together a final series of messages that could span the rest of my time here but at least for this morning I decided I would stay with the lectionary because I have always really enjoyed these two passages laid before us this Sunday. Philippians 2 is a classic favorite of most all devout Christians! Everyone has heard Philippians 2 quoted at some time or another. It is so central to our understanding of what true Christianity is, that it is worth stating once again even though we just read it:

Phil 2:3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Phil 2:4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Phil 2:5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Phil 2:6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, Phil 2:7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. Phil 2:8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!

This past week I had someone who saw my car in the turnaround and so stopped in to say goodbye, not having been here since the lockdown began. After the pleasantries were dispensed, my visitor indicated that there was a very important question that needed to be asked. I paused what I was doing and began to listen more closely. The question was very important and was simply this: Was Jesus Christ actually God or was He just our Savior?

Wow! This person was right, weren't they? It was a very important question! I reviewed the doctrine of the Trinity and said that if Jesus wasn't God then it would have been impossible for Him to have paid an infinite price for the sin of the world, even if as

only a man he had been 100% perfect. Then and only then might he have been able to die for his own, as theologians would call it, **original sin** but not for ours. I quoted several verses the other day. I could have gone right here.

Paul clearly tells us here that Jesus existed as God but chose to temporarily set aside His Deity, laying it aside to be made in the form of a human being becoming a servant and perhaps there is nothing better that can be said when thinking about other people by saying simply, think of them as being as important or more important than you are. That's who Jesus was and that's what Jesus did! Jesus was God and the God of the Universe is a personal, loving, giving, compassionate, and good God. Jesus said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father!" "I and the Father are one." "Before Abraham was, I AM!"

I read a political story this week that I thought was relevant for our times today and good enough to risk sharing. It is a story about a former president. It is often said that before we judge or hope to understand someone's life we would do well to walk a mile in their shoes. Or perhaps in this case join them on a car ride from Washington D.C. to Texas.

Before he became vice-president and eventually ascended to the White House after JFK's assassination in 63, Lyndon Baines Johnson sometimes asked his black housemaid and butler, Helen and Gene Williams, to drive his spare car from the nation's capital back to Austin. On one occasion he also asked them if they would take along the family beagle.

Gene hesitated. LBJ wondered why. "The dog loves you," he said, "and he shouldn't give you any trouble." Johnson didn't get it. Gene Williams decided it was time to help him understand. He described what, back then, it was like for a black couple to spend three days traversing the Deep South. Because of Jim Crow legislation that had been in place for three-quarters of a century, blacks couldn't access the bathrooms, lunch counters, motels, swimming pools, theaters, restaurants, or even drinking fountains that were reserved for whites.

After driving for hours, the Williams would invest even more hours looking for a diner that would serve them. They would sometimes venture miles beyond the highway searching for a bathroom. Finding a hotel that would welcome them was inevitably a struggle. This was Gene's summary to LBJ: "A colored man's got trouble getting across the South on his own, without having a dog along."

LBJ's eyes were opened. He had nothing to say to Gene. As Doris Kearns Goodwin notes in her book, Leadership in Turbulent Times, Johnson shared what he learned from the Williams over and over again as he talked with Southern leaders and diehard segregationists. He knew that facts and figures wouldn't change hardened hearts. But a compelling story has the capacity to get under your skin. Wasn't it time to eliminate the sheer evil of the South's systemic racial injustice?

President Kennedy, before LBJ, had talked earnestly about civil rights but had failed to take decisive action. It was just 5 days after entering the Oval Office – and less than a year before the next election – LBJ decided to risk his entire presidency on moving forward. When a friend suggested he would almost certainly be wasting his time and energy on a lost cause, Johnson responded: **“Well, what the h__ _'s the Presidency for?”**

On November 27th LBJ told Congress, “We have talked long enough in this country about equal right. We have talked for 100 years or more. It is time now to write the next chapter, and to write it in the books of law.” Goodwin declares that great leaders know what causes are worth risking everything for. They can discern the moment when it's time to push all their chips to the center of the table.

LBJ knew what it would cost. He said, “It was destined to set me apart forever from the South.” He risked his friendships, his political future, and his reputation. He acted anyways. The result was the Civil Rights Act of 1964, America's first legislative effort to address the injustices and social humiliations targeting people of color.

The Apostle Paul says it clearly. We all have the responsibility to treat others, (that would be everyone - people of every nationality, every color) better than ourselves and in so doing, seek to be like Jesus. Here are the same words I read but from a different translation:

**Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.”
(Philippians 2:4, The Message).**

We have a problem in America right now, don't we? Do you think it's going to be solved by burning, looting, rioting and destroying? I don't! I think it's going to be solved by prayer and asking God for forgiveness and asking for revival, just like over 50,000 Christians did yesterday as they gathered in Washington D.C. in the prayer march to pray for our country!

Jentezen Franklin praying alongside Dr. Alveda King (Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's niece) and Darrell Strawberry reminded the world that it was Simon Cyrene, a black man, who was the first human being to be covered by the blood of Jesus as he carried Jesus cross!

When we do this we truly are allowing God to be working through us! Amen? Amen.

(But that's not my final amen! Speaking of a good story you have to love the story of Jesus taking on the religious establishment of his day in Matthew 21. The leaders question Jesus authority and so although He didn't question their authority directly, indirectly He did! I love how Jesus does this. Alright, You answer my question and then I'll answer yours, Fair? Ok!

The question Jesus asks has to do with the recently martyred John the Baptist. This story too is worth hearing again:

Mt 21:25 John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' Mt 21:26 But if we say, 'From men'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet." Mt 21:27 So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

Now here is the thing. I have typed out these thoughts and with this sentence I am typing on my fourth page. Whenever I get to the fourth page I know I should be wrapping things up. I understand that!

After Church this past Sunday someone who has been faithfully reading through the Bible in our 1 year plan indicated they were a few days behind and planned to go home that afternoon and catch up. I said I too had fallen behind and was still in Isaiah! Just a few days ago I read chapter 40 in Isaiah's letter. Chapter 40 is a pivotal point in Isaiah as the whole book takes a turn and instead of continuing to declare the "burdens and the woes" and telling about the captivities that are coming, Isaiah prophecies of how one day God is going to come Himself.

All four of the Gospels are built upon the book of Isaiah and speak up front about John's ministry. When John came he constantly quoted Isaiah who had heralded him. The religious leaders simply didn't listen to John and hadn't accepted his ministry which was to announce the coming of GOD, the Messiah. So Jesus says:

"Fine, if you're not going to answer Me, then I'm not going to answer you!"

Let that story get under your skin! May it be so... amen.