

## Kenosis

Isaiah 52:13-15  
Philippians 2:1-13

“I was here **long** before you came, and I'll be here **long** after you're gone.” So said the woman behind a finger wagging in my nose. It happened more than 25 years ago in a church I pastored. I recall exactly where we stood—even the directions each of us faced. But I cannot recall why she had gotten so angry with me. I imagine I deserved it. At that point I was still a cocky young man. That church was composed of a tight network of people, many related to each other, most of whom had known each other all their lives. Many of their grandparents had belonged to that congregation. And here I came: full of big ideas and pushing hard for changes. Early on I was not terribly sensitive to their feelings. But before my seven years there ended that same woman helped spearhead adding a youth director position to the staff (my idea). She was always generous with my family. How did she do that? **We** did it by each of us consciously, intentionally deferring to the other.

A wise elder, an outsider like me who had moved to town some years before, intervened. He said he liked us both, and felt that if we could work together good things would happen. He asked us to lunch. He brought his Bible and read the very passage we just read in Philippians. It cut me to my heart. Linda and I had had that same passage read during our wedding ceremony. The woman and I both agreed to try to follow its teachings. And if I did not instantly become a more deferant, open-

mindful leader, I did change over time. And so did the woman. Both she and the wise elder passed away years ago, but I can say with joy that before they did the Lord moved me to thank them in person for their part in shaping me.

“Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” So wrote the Apostle Paul to a congregation. And so he writes to this congregation. Please understand, I do not preach this as an admonition—nor, for that matter, did Paul—but as an encouragement to a church that already does a better-than-average job of maintaining a loving unity. At the 2019 church officer training retreat I asked the elders and deacons to identify this congregation's core values. Among those so identified were, “We love and support one another,” and, “We make decisions in a respectful, collegial way.” I felt these were accurate then. Over a year later I am certain they are. Yet we ought never allow ourselves to become complacent. We ought always remind ourselves to unify and to put others before self. We need the encouragement we find in Philippians 2 to imitate Christ.

This chapter contains a crucial Christological point. Christology is that branch of theology that addresses the nature and being of Jesus Christ. Here in Philippians 2 we find a focus on his decision to empty himself, to humble himself. Paul tells us he “(took) the form of a slave.” (The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates “slave” as “servant”. While the original Greek word did technically apply to servants in the Roman world, in our world slave is a more accurate rendering of Paul's meaning.) Jesus became a human being, and while he never surrendered his divine

nature, his “godness”, he chose to accept everything that comes with human vulnerability—even death—even death on a cross, as Paul notes.

The Roman Empire permitted executions on the cross for only certain “lower” classes of people, slaves for example. The Romans executed most people by beheading with a sword. The aristocracy were given the “opportunity” to poison themselves if convicted of a capital crime. While each method resulted in death, the cross prolonged and intensified the agony of the dying process. Medical historians estimate the average death on a cross took longer than twelve hours. The actual cause of death was usually asphyxiation, caused by the victim's inability to continue raising his chest wall to inhale while hanging from his wrists and ankles. (The Gospels of Mark and Luke describe Jesus' death with the words, “He breathed his last.”) In addition, the Jews interpreted certain Old Testament passages as claiming that the crucified were utterly separated from God for eternity. I could add more, but I believe I have made my point. Jesus—God—accepted the most brutal and shameful of deaths.

At this point it might seem Paul's argument is that we ought to die like Jesus died. Actually, we *will* die like Jesus died, in the sense that we all come to that “end”. But Paul saw death as a transition into eternity. Of Jesus, he wrote, “Therefore God has highly exalted him...” The “therefore” refers to the obedience Jesus showed to the will of God, to his emptying himself of divine power and dying. Because Jesus accepted the slavery of human weakness, he fulfilled God's—his own—plan. And the purpose of that plan is that “every knee should bow and every tongue confess that

Jesus Christ is Lord.” But even this is not the final act in God's drama. That comes only when we “work out (our) own salvation with fear and trembling.”

That word work has caused quite the ruckus across the centuries. It has struck many Christians as advocating for “works righteousness”. Works righteousness is the false concept that sinful human beings could somehow work themselves into good standing with God, that we could somehow earn our way into God's good graces. Theologians from St. Augustine to Martin Luther to Karl Barth have thoroughly discredited the idea. They have found biblical support throughout the Bible, in both Testaments. While it is true the Book of James skewers those who believe they can somehow have genuine faith without works, not even there do we find a defense of works righteousness. What, then, should we do with Philippians 2:12?

We should put that verse into context, that's what. Paul had just written about the work of Jesus Christ, about his having died and risen to glory for us. This, and only this, produces our opportunity to receive salvation. But we do have our part to play. We are to imitate Jesus. We are to seek unity of minds and souls. We are to place others ahead of ourselves. We are to empty ourselves. We are to trust God that though we must die we will live to God. Preeminently we “work out our salvation in fear and trembling” by accepting the gift of faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Paul concluded by claiming when we do these things, “God is at work in (us), both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” When we imitate Christ we want (will) and work to do what he wants us to do.

A moment ago I said part of our imitation of Christ is to “empty ourselves”. Philippians 2:7 tells us he “emptied himself”. The operative Greek word is *kenoo*, which literally means to make empty or to pour out. In Greek usage it normally referred to emptying a vat or vessel. The vessel itself remained. Jesus remained God. But he had voluntarily poured himself out, made himself a negation, a cavity where once he had housed infinite power. As Gerhard Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament puts it, “The point, then, is that Christ does not selfishly exploit his divine form but lays it aside to take the form of a slave.” This is the emptying to which Paul calls us. We are to lay aside whatever power we possess and enslave ourselves to one another and to Christ himself.

In the twentieth century a new school of theological thought arose. Called Kenosis (the noun form of the verb *kenoo*), this school advocated that Christians place a great deal more emphasis on the call to servitude than most, especially those in the First World, had ever done. Not to be confused with a contemporary movement, Liberation Theology, Kenosis focused on serving the poor and the broken. Today we hear calls for the privileged to submit to the oppressed. Something about these calls does not resonate for me, does not square with my understanding of what ***mutual submission*** means. Yet the call to become servants of Christ and of one another remains. Serving the poor and broken spiritually means seeing them as equally beloved in the eyes of God. It means not lording it over them, not even in our hearts and minds. It means voluntarily relinquishing whatever power over them our culture and our history have given us. This kind of submission strikes me as precisely the call

to service that came out of Jesus' mouth and Paul's quill.

Linda and I did have Philippians 2:1-11 read at our wedding. Our marriage has had its ups and downs. We are not perfect. But we have usually tried to count each other better than ourselves. This has played a major part in whatever success our relationship has achieved over the nearly 45 years we have been together. If you have ever had the blessing of participating in a long-term relationship characterized by mutual emptying, putting each other ahead of self, you know the truth of this. A power becomes felt, perceived, real. That power makes an impact, goes to work. I believe that power is the Holy Spirit of God. We describe it with words like love, mercy, trust. It so happens the New Testament labels each of these as gifts of the Spirit. When we put each other first we receive the gifts of the Spirit. And we give them.

I would challenge each of us—and all of us as the Body of Christ—to take this putting others first to a deeper level. It may not always be easy to do this in a marriage or a friendship. It is much harder to break out of our comfort zones to put others ahead of ourselves, others we may not understand or, honestly, value. Where does your life brush up against the lives of others, people whom we do not know well enough to trust, people who may have very different political and social convictions than our own, people who may vote opposite of how we intend to, people who nevertheless might be blessed by our vulnerability?

Put them ahead of yourself. Receive, and give, the Spirit.