

Text: Philippians 2: 1-11
Title: Back to Basics
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I'm told that after being hit by a car I repeatedly asked the doctor, "When will I be able to run?" I had a severed artery, a fractured femur, a blown-out knee, a separated pelvis, a gaping hole in my calf, a rack of broken ribs, a punctured lung, and I was asking about running....

I don't remember anything from the first week, but I do remember trying to move as soon as they'd let me – even just a step or two. I remember trying to walk without the walker, or the brace, or the boot. I remember trying to get across the room, to the end of the hall, to the end of the block, and eventually trying to run at night on empty streets. I wanted to get back to the only life I knew, so as soon as I could muster any movement I was on a bike, in the pool, or on the road. I was trying to get back to basics.

Pandemic policies, the denomination's human sexuality debate, the splintering of the American body-politic, the soup of information and misinformation, the ebb and flow of people retiring, graduating, taking new jobs, moving, and funerals for friends and family, and, and, and.... And it can feel like Hope Church got hit by a car.

Dear friends, there's no missing that these last years have taken a toll. We did the best we could to navigate the road in front of us, but if you measure things like worship attendance, numbers of kids in programs, babies, baptisms, and transfers – it feels like we got knocked into a ditch.

The only measure that matters is: How does a church proclaim and embody the gospel? How does it gather and nurture followers of Jesus Christ? But, over the last few years it's been easy to look at other measures and get discouraged, or think we should try something different, do something different, be something different. It's been easy to wonder if we should change to thrive or just to survive.

But, in discouragement, I look back to basics. The only movement I can muster is toward the basic commitments of the only life we've known. And for Hope, getting back to basics means trying to follow Philippians 2:1-11 as a way to live out the gospel. In that spirit, let us consider the basics of Hope Church.

The beginning of our text is addressed to a community:

If you (plural, so y'all) 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 it will be found in life together.

Paul writes to the *ekklesia* in the Philippi. *Ekklesia* is the Greek word for church, it literally means “the called-out ones.” The church is called out to be an alternative community – a community united in identification with Jesus Christ.

At our most basic we are called together – not by ethnicity, education, political persuasion, worship style, economic class, sexual orientation, or theological impulse but by belonging to Jesus Christ.

You may have better friends in other places, you may be more comfortable with others, you may have disagreements with one another, but at its best church is an intergenerational web of mutually dependent people who, to use the language of our text, are united in Christ and value others above themselves.

Community is hard to do.

We live 45 minutes in all directions. New people wonder how they’ll find substantive connections, old people harbor old habits, we’ve all got busy lives and boatloads of issues, and I can bear witness that political posturing on social media doesn’t serve us well. There’s hurt, disappointment, and bewilderment on both sides of the aisle. But to embody the gospel is to be in community. Against the tide of individualism, loneliness, and tribalism we’re longing for, searching after, and trying to build community – united in Christ.

Our text reads that our “relationships with one another” would arise out of the same “attitude of mind.” That’s an odd phrase because the translator is trying to communicate that “mind” here means more than thinking or rationality. It’s the fullness of human disposition, psyche, worldview, and a way of relating to creation. And therefore, to follow Christ is not just to be part of a community, but it invites a habit of heart and mind.

This morning we’re starting Sunday school and adult education. We’ve launched new seasons of “God Loves Me” and “Children in Worship” and we’ll soon start a new worship education class for kids and a Bible study for women. I hope other studies will start, because even with all of its complexity and obscurity we find our bearings in this ancient text and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

And that calls for a measure of biblical literacy in a post-biblical culture; that calls for the deep roots of the Reformed tradition in a rootless world. Contemporary culture has a curriculum that shapes mind, body, and spirit; the *ekklesia* is called to a different curriculum and that requires an investment of time, attention, and self. A once-a-week-18-minute-sermon isn’t going to cut it.

Community.
Education.

The second half of our text is thought to be one of the first Christian hymns. Therefore, it’s helpful to think of the first verses of our text as a preacher encouraging a congregation, building to a homiletical high point...

In humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests, but each to the interests of others. In your relationships with one another have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had, who...

And then just at that crescendo the preacher breaks into song.

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his advantage; rather he made himself nothing....

And out rolls this beautiful hymn about the movement from deity to death. The Greek word here is *kenosis* – emptying. This early hymn proclaims the staggering mystery of a self-emptying God.

That's to say that we're little more than a liturgical-country-club or a pencil-necked-book-club if our life together is just community and education. To be shaped in the mind of Christ is to be engaged in this world in love and service.

We exist for *kenosis* – to empty ourselves for the sake of others. That's hard to define and even harder to live into, but by vocation and avocation, we're called to pursue, bear witness to, and empty ourselves for the sake of creation's *shalom*.

In a couple weeks Moises and Erin Pacheco will mark one year in their own worship space – as they plant Grace in Garfield Park. They can testify that its harder than they thought, but with Hope's blessing and support they're living into their calling to birth a new multi-ethnic-intergenerational-church.

We've got folks serving breakfast this morning at Roseland Christian Ministries. We provide lunches every month, have folks helping every week, and that little southside congregation knows us as partners. We recently helped sponsor and settle an Afghan refugee family. We're consistently linked up in support of Elim, Together We Cope, and Christian schools in all sorts of contexts. Our deacons list opportunities for service almost every week and they're looking at new missionary support in the future. Etcetera, etcetera....

And, in 20 years we've only once missed paying 100% of our Denominational Ministry Shares. Almost 1/3 of our annual budget goes to work and witness all over the world. Thanks be to God.

The basics.
Community.
Education.
Servanthood.

Peter Marty – pastor of a big Lutheran church, editor of the Christian Century, and son of Martin Marty – called this week. By upbringing and career there are few better equipped to talk about the church in America. He told me that when they got the post-pandemic-all-clear to return to in-person worship they cancelled their worship livestream. They kept a sermon podcast, but they turned off the cameras. He said,

What we do in worship requires our bodies, holy and broken. Singing together, celebrating the eucharist, seeing one another, listening, praying – it's too abundant to leave to a flat screen. It means too much and in our traditions it just makes for bad TV.

He's right....

Now. We're not going to turn off our cameras (yet), our livestream has been helpful for folks in all sorts of spaces and places, but to get back to basics is to be gathered in worship.

Our text descends to death on a cross and from there it reaches to the highest place in heaven wherein all people – in time and space – fall on their knees to worship Jesus Christ. The movement is from *kenosis* to cosmic lordship. Our text starts in being united in Christ, traverses through the cross, and ends in all creation joined in worship.

Worship is the one constant that gathers us together.
We're united in bowing and confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Not unlike coffee or cabernet, worship at Hope is an acquired taste. Our liturgical-folksy-worship-and-quirky-preaching takes some getting used to. We're consistently led by intergenerational voices in prayer, liturgy, and music. We invest in the gifts of Dora, Lynn, Dave, Bev, and Erin because each brings a unique musical voice, draws out the gifts of others, and is committed to congregational singing. There's no worship-tainment. There's a reason they're in the back....

Back to basics.
Community.
Education.
Servanthood.
Worship.

To do less than that is to forsake our reason for being.
To do more than that is to lose track of our reason for being.

I don't know where the road will lead. I don't know the coming splits, bumps, rocky passages and slippery slopes. I can't see the next crash. But no matter the road, we're called to these basics.

Next week we're gathering on Sunday evening to think about why we choose Hope and what we dream for Hope. We'll try to build on what we appreciate, affirm, and hope. We've got lots of flaws, and there are all sorts of churches for all sorts of people, but we'll try to imagine the future to which God calls Hope.

I hope you'll join us.

I didn't know any other way back after the crash then to go back to the basics. Philippians 2 has been our basic framework for 19 years. May God continue to bless our life together. Amen.