March 2, 2014  
Church of Peace, United Church of Christ  
Rev. Mariah Marlin-Warfield  
Philippians 2: 1-13

Humility in Christ

These days many of us are reading Piper Kerman’s memoir, *Orange is the New Black*. This book tells the story of Kerman’s experience being incarcerated in the Federal Correctional Institution in Danbury, Connecticut. You are invited to join us for book club on Tuesday March 11th when Jessica will be leading the discussion. In this book, you find there are so many instructions that regulate life in prison; there are more rules than high school. Also in this book, there are poignant moments of friendship. Just like in life, there are rules. And there are people.

That’s also true when it comes to our faith. Following Christ involves practicing a demanding body of ethics. In the Gospels Jesus is quick to point out that he comes not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Go and sell your possessions. Go and serve those in need. Go and do the same. We learn our faith from instruction and practice. And of course, we learn our faith from the people we love.

In one of the later chapters in her memoir, Piper Kerman explains her own position on religion, which I would call respectful skepticism. Then she describes a conversation she had with another inmate, Gisela. Here, Gisela does not tell Piper about her religion, or her church, or the Bible. She shares her experience of God’s love. She shares God’s love and nothing less, and Piper’s heart is moved.

She writes, “In prison, for the first time, I understood that faith could help people see beyond themselves, not into the abyss but into the street, into the mix, to offer what was best about themselves to others. I grew to this understanding by knowing people like Sister, Yoga Janet, Gisela, and even my holy-roller pedicurist Rose. Rose... told me what she had learned from her faith...” Kerman continues, “I thought later that hers were the most powerful words a person could utter: ‘I’ve got a lot to give.’”

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Piper Kerman’s writing proves she has a lot to give too. Everybody does. If you’re looking to develop and grow in your faith, you might try writing to someone who is locked up. Indeed, our Christian faith has been handed down through letters from prison and through the surprising friendships that end up saving our lives.

Our scripture this morning comes from the letter Paul wrote to his beloved church in Philippi while he was locked up. The emotion pours through his writing which begins, “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you…” (1: 3-4). He goes on to say, “For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best…” (1: 8-10a). Paul writes to this congregation to instruct and encourage them in the keeping of their faith and their living of the Gospel.

And so we arrive at the scripture we hear this morning. This just might be one of the most commonly memorized and warmly cherished biblical passages in our Christian faith. It is Paul’s invitation to participate in the humility of Christ. Reading this one way, you hear a letter of love from our brother. Read another way, it sounds like rules.

I used to do my laundry at the Spin Cycle in Chicago. The walls were full of posters with threats and rules pertaining to unattended laundry and unattended children. Don’t even think of riding in the carts or climbing in the dryers! Now of course. There’s a time and a place to read a handbook of rules or an operating manual with instructions. But it’s a problem if we read this scripture thinking that’s what it is.

Hear these words of Paul, “If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete, be of the same mind, having the same love…” And here’s the hard part: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (2: 1-4).

If we think of this as a set of rules that could go on a poster, then we have a problem. At best, it simply doesn’t work to require a person to share the humility of Jesus Christ. It works about as well as being in distress and having someone
scream at you to “Just relax!” True humility doesn’t come from compliance with the rules. At worst, there can be danger in the direction to regard others as better than you. Somebody could read that and think the Bible says to stay in an abusive relationship. That is not what it says.

And if it’s instructions we’re after, the next part gets worse. Upon inviting us to be like Christ, Paul describes how Jesus empties himself and takes the form of a slave. “Being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death. Even death on a cross” (Philippians 2: 7b-8) — the kind of death that comes with torture and humiliation. It makes my stomach turn over.

In our faith there are rules, and there are people. Here in this letter of love to the congregation at Philippi, Paul is not laying out the rules. What he’s doing is sharing his own testimony of faith, and he does this by quoting a song.

This passage is one of the earliest Christian hymns. If you look at it in your pew Bibles you see it written in verse. The first two stanzas describe Christ’s humanity, humility, and death. The song concludes with God exalting Christ, the name above every other name. Every knee shall bend, every tongue confess! Paul reminds the people of this song, presents it like a gift, here is the story of our savior. Now work out your own salvation in fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you.

Maybe you can relate to Paul’s approach. Maybe there’s a hymn that holds holy the resplendent power of your faith. Indeed when explaining has run its course, all that’s left is our song. Thank God.

In the church of my childhood, one of the most beloved hymns was the Fanny Crosby classic, Blessed Assurance.

Now if you just look at the lyrics on the page, I see a lot of reason to argue. Our faith includes doubt and wonder. It could seem awfully presumptuous to assert, “Blessed assurance. Jesus is mine!” I take issue with some of the atonement imagery. The second and third verses begin with the words, “Perfect submission.” Now I’m one who thinks our world could do a with little more liberation and a little less submission. But that misses the point here, that submission to the rules is not at all the same as submission to Christ.

Thankfully, the truth of this song does not come in analyzing every verse. The truth of a hymn happens when you sing it together, like bread broken and the
cup poured out. I remember standing with the people in the community church in Kettering, Ohio. These were the people I knew and loved. I knew their lives and their problems, and they knew mine. Even the man whose wife was in the hospital, the girl who was adjusting to her parents’ divorce, the parents whose son was deployed in Iraq, they showed up and joined in singing:

“This is my story, this is my song, praising my savior all the day long. This is my story, this is my song, praising my savior all the day long.”

Oh my friends, you just can’t argue with that. Sharing a hymn as a church can give us blessed assurance, when that might be what we need most. Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, right? For God is at work in you.

Here we are a people who help each other find our way into the humility of Jesus Christ. This humility is not a plan to feel bad about ourselves. Exactly the opposite. It is an invitation to hear how the Spirit calls us to come on in and listen to each other. It’s like when you sing the melody line, I can hear how to join in and follow the alto part.

Paul writes a letter from prison proclaiming how Christ comes into the world even as a slave, even to those who are enslaved. God knows too many people are still locked up and enslaved. Paul sings and teaches: This is the Lord Jesus Christ. My faith is in Christ; may it be so for you. You just can’t argue with that.

There are rules and there are people. And thank God for the people who teach us our faith. Together we prove correct the claim from Piper’s pedicurist, Rose: We have so much to give. May it be so.

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