

## *Humble Ambition*

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – October 5, 2003

### Sermon Background Study

#### *Scripture Passages*

*Psalm 51:10-17 (NRSV)*

- <sup>10</sup>Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
<sup>11</sup>Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
<sup>12</sup>Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.  
<sup>13</sup>Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return to you.  
<sup>14</sup>Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,  
O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.  
<sup>15</sup>O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.  
<sup>16</sup>For you have no delight in sacrifice;  
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.  
<sup>17</sup>The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

*Philippians 2:1-5 (NRSV)*

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, <sup>2</sup>make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup>Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

*Today, we conclude the four-week series: Finding Joy.  
We consider the places of humility and selflessness in our  
search for joy.*

#### *A broken spirit*

In v. 17 from today's Psalm, the psalmist writes, "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit." Wow . . . I bet that one gives you pause! I've been writing these studies for more than a year now and I could not count the number of times I've had to confront a phrase or an idea that runs counter to nearly everything the world has sought to teach me. Ask yourself . . . have you ever wished that your child's or your sibling's or your friend's spirit would be broken? I doubt it. What could the psalmist mean . . . and more to the point, what does it mean to us? Surely, by "broken," God can't mean oppressed or dysfunctional or damaged. God is our loving Father and what sort of father would want that for his children.

Still, I've raised three sons and if there is one thing I remember about small children it is that they are a selfish lot. I've yet to meet the two-year old who doesn't think that he or she stands at the very center of the universe! All parents struggle to lead their children away from self-centeredness. I suspect that for many of us, our parents' work is never quite finished. Indeed, the psalmist

#### Selflessness & Sacrifice

This summer, I taught a three-part series on the Christian understandings of faith, hope, and love. In preparing for each lecture, I tried to find a single word that would capture the essence of each understanding. For "faith," I settled upon "trust." For "hope, I settled upon "confidence." And for "love," I settled upon "sacrifice."

In the Bible, "love" is always an action verb. It is not a sentiment – it is about what we do. In all of our doings, we are called to model Jesus, to be Christlike. As Paul puts it in today's passage, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." And where do we look as we seek to model Jesus? We look to the cross. As Richard Hays wrote, "Jesus' death on the cross is the paradigm for faithfulness to God in this world. . . Jesus' death is consistently interpreted in the NT as an act of self-giving love . . . the community is consistently called to take up the cross and follow."<sup>1</sup> Paul tells the Philippians, "I want to know Christ . . . and the sharing (*koinonia*) of his sufferings" (3:10). For Paul anything he might suffer for the sake of his ministry and his beloved Christians would be nothing compared to the suffering Christ had endured for Paul and for us all.

<sup>1</sup>from Richard Hays' book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 197.

understands this about himself. By a “broken spirit . . . a broken and contrite heart,” the psalmist speaks to simple humility and selflessness, to putting God and others ahead of ourselves. This is the message that Paul brings to the Philippians – humility and selflessness lie on the path to joy.

*Make me happy!*

Paul cared deeply for each church that he started and, surely, he hoped that they felt the same way towards him. In this letter, he told them flat out what would make him happy – “Have the same thoughts, share the same love, be of one soul and mind . . . don’t do anything from selfish ambition or from a cheap desire to boast, but be humble towards one another, always considering others better than yourself . . . look out for one another’s interests, not just your own” (from the Good News Bible). This is what would make Paul happy, make his own joy complete. He didn’t want the Philippians’ praise or their money – only that they would humbly love one another.

Sometimes the Bible challenges our understanding – but not here. There is nothing confusing or ambiguous in Paul’s words. The challenge lies not in the understanding, but in the doing. We are called to lives of selflessness and sacrifice. Not only are we to “do unto others as they do unto us,” we are to put all others ~ everyone ~ ahead of ourselves. Indeed, this is the very meaning of love in the New Testament. True love is not merely a feeling, it is action. Love is not abstract; it is concrete. God loved so much that he gave his only Son to die on a Roman cross. It is in the shadow of the cross that we learn about love: love is sacrifice and self-giving. It is putting others ahead of ourselves. It is the practice of humility – even in the midst of our ambitions.

#### Humility at Work??

Believe me, I know that humility is not exactly a treasured commodity in many workplaces. But still, looking back over my career in business, I can remember several managers who always seemed to put others ahead of themselves and yet were able to achieve their career ambitions. These were all confident people who valued trust in a relationship above all else. They seemed to almost intuitively understand that trust enables people to take risks and to learn well. They understood that trust takes a long time to develop, but can be destroyed almost instantly. They were always willing to help others get ahead; indeed, they took great satisfaction (joy!?) in helping others discover talents that they never knew they had.

I don’t know whether these men and women were Christians, but they were certainly servant leaders (though I doubt they ever thought of themselves that way!). Their confident selflessness and humble ambition were evident to all. Indeed, we are blessed that here, at St. Andrew, we have some servant leaders of our own.

#### *Humble Ambition*

The typical Philippian Christian hearing Paul’s letter read aloud<sup>1</sup> was probably a farmer or herder, or perhaps a simple merchant or tradesman or homemaker. Their ambitions might have been to add a few sheep to their flock or sell a few more tunics in the market. We live in a far different world. Many of our life ambitions are played out in organizations. The large for-profit and not-for-profit organizations for which so many of us work simply did not exist in the first century. We live in the Age of the Organization – and it is only little more than 100 years old!

In some ways, our challenges exceed those faced by the Philippians. Most of us do not work in isolation or even amongst just a few trusted friends. Rather, whether we are working with others to build cars or instruct third-graders or care for the ill, many of us have to manage countless relationships every day. We have ample opportunities “to push our way to the front” or “sweet-talk our way to the top” rather than to “put ourselves aside and help others get ahead.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, such words hardly even seem to make sense in the context of the many modern workplaces. But we are followers of Jesus, seeking to be ever-better disciples. We seek to do as our Master did. We don’t get to pick and choose among our relationships ~ as if we are called to be humble, selfless, and Christlike with some people, but not others; at home, but not at work. Paul calls us to put the interests of others ahead of our own so that we may find the joy we seek.

<sup>1</sup>In the first century, only about 5-10% of people were literate. Even in the cities, it wasn’t more than 15%. Thus, Paul’s letters were read aloud to Christians when they gathered in homes for worship and fellowship.

<sup>2</sup>These phrases are all from Peterson’s rendering of verse 3 in his paraphrase of Philippians in *The Message*.

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Philippians 1:27-30 We re privileged to believe in Christ and to suffer for him. It is because of this privilege that we joyfully suffer for others.</p>	<p>Day 2 Romans 12 Goodwill in the community of God's people.</p>
<p>Day 3 3 John Notice that John has nothing good to say about Diotrephes - who puts himself first!</p>	<p>Day 4 Mark 8:34 - 9:1 The cost of following Jesus. He has his cross; we have ours.</p>
<p>Day 5 Galatians 6:1-10 Bearing one another's burdens ~ and additional advice</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

## Sermon Notes

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*Are you in a Sunday morning class? If not – try one!*

Scott Engle's new Sunday morning class, *Something More*, is open to all adults. We meet in Wesley Hall (the 'old' sanctuary) at 9:30. It is a great chance to make new friends and learn more about the Bible and the Christian faith. More than 140 people have joined the class! The class is based on the Sunday morning sermon series and background studies. It is a lecture-oriented class, but there is always plenty of time for questions, answers, and fellowship.

**Please join us next week!**

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In the verses immediately preceding today's passage from Philippians, Paul says that we are privileged to believe in Christ and we are privileged to suffer for him. Paul binds together our theology and our ethics. On the one hand, we confess that Jesus is Lord and Savior, and with the other hand, we put others before ourselves, living in humility and selflessness. We cannot ignore the demands of the Gospel and still proclaim its truth. Discuss what this holding together of theology and ethics means for our lives as Christians, as we strive to be better disciples. You might make a list of key beliefs and then consider the ethical implications of those beliefs. Or turn it around. Make a list of what we are called to *do*, and then discuss the theological implications of those practices. Why do we do what we do? Only because Jesus said so? . . . or ought we to look a little deeper.
2. In her commentary on Philippians, Morna Hooker reminds us that "we cannot expect to find ready-made answers to these modern-day questions in the Bible." The Bible is not a magic answer book! Paul cannot give us a rule book for how to conduct ourselves in the office. Instead, we need to go back to first principles, to consider what God is like and to consider what God has done for us. Paul has given us hints. Unity and harmony seem to be key, as are humility and selflessness and sacrifice. What other hints are there? What sort of portrait emerges from these hints? Take one tough subject (your choice!) and consider how these hints might take us in one direction or another. For example, how does "sacrifice" inform our discussion of homosexuality or prayer in schools?