

He Emptied Himself

Sunday, July 17, 2022 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa
Philippians 2:5-7 "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men."

- Introduction: The Bishop in Les Misérables. What he did.

Some years ago I read Victor Hugo's classic "Les Misérables" and one of the characters I remember most was one that never made it into the movie. Early in the story, the criminal Jean Valjean attempts to steal some silverware from the house of a local Catholic bishop and is caught. At risk of being returned to prison, John knows that he is at the mercy of the bishop, who proceeds to tell the police officer that he gave the silverware to him for safe keeping. As the police officer leaves, the bishop gives John the remaining pieces of the set and then claims his soul for God. John, thinking the bishop is crazy, takes the silver and makes a run for it and the two men never see each other again, but the life of Jean Valjean is forever changed. It seems the bishop was in the habit of doing things like that, always giving something away. It turns out to be strategic, as is the life our Lord chose for this world.

- Set the Stage

Philippians, like most of the New Testament, is a letter to persecuted Christians by a persecuted Christian. Paul is in a jail cell somewhere in Rome. He advises the Christians of the city of Philippi to have the same mindset of Jesus, who thought it not robbery to be equal with God. A strange statement but also one of the strongest statements in the New Testament about the divinity of Jesus, which, ironically, tells us that Jesus was willing to set aside the trappings of divinity instead of guarding His position and throne jealously.

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In a key statement, the Bible tells us that instead of guarding His status as the Son of God, Jesus was willing to "make Himself of no repute", literally that He was willing to "empty Himself" and join the human race. In one of the mysteries of Scripture, Jesus remained God yet joined fully the human race. He did not disguise Himself and pretend to join, but actually joined the human race in a poor family of modest means with no great social standing, without any trappings of pomp and ceremony in a part of the Roman Empire that was considered a backwater populated by people with whom the Romans found hard to get along. He was a nobody. He was without consequence. And then He chose to be obedient to the Father, even to death, even to death on a cross. Because of this the Father has exalted Jesus to have a name higher than any other name, and that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven, on earth and under the earth. There is no one who has more authority.

- Application: Let this mind be in you

The application for today is that humility is strategic. The world, or the commonalities of culture that does not recognize the wisdom of Scripture, would have us to believe that relentless self promotion and the pursuit of our dreams without concern for other dreams is paramount. But Jesus proved that humility is strategic. It invites the blessing of God, and humble service in reverence to God is not only a good way to live the days of your life, it is the path to greatness. The Master Himself said that if you want to be the greatest of all be the servant of all. The passage, notably, states that Jesus took on the form of a bondservant—a slave by choice, and there is no indication that He renounced His humanity when He rose from the dead. He also retained His servant's heart and we are called to be bondservants to the man who is Himself a bondservant even though He sits at the right hand of the Father as the eternal Son of God. If that attitude is good enough for Him, it is good enough for us as well.

The Prisoners of War

We should pray for margin in our lives, that we would not be so busy that we do not ever have the time or the means to invest in the life of another. Let us pray for wisdom to be creative with our opportunities as well as our difficulties. I once read a story of a group of soldiers, prisoners of war in Vietnam. The conditions were harsh, and everybody was always hungry. One day, a group of sadistic guards came up with a plan. They bound the hands of every prisoner behind their back and sat them all at tables filled with delicious food. They could reach it with a fork that was placed before every prisoner, but remember, their hands were tied behind their backs. The guard left the prisoners to their misery, expecting them to be driven almost to madness by the food just out of reach. To their horror, they returned to find most of the food gone and all the prisoners full. They couldn't feed themselves, but they were able to feed each other, and the guards did not take that into account.

What happened to the bishop?

Back to *Les Misérables*. The bishop eventually went blind, but what would have been a terrible predicament for others became a sort of heaven for him. When she learned of his failing eyesight, his sister sold her house and moved in with him so that she could always take care of him. But she never went with him when he left for business, however, because he had developed such a reputation in the community that anyone who saw him leave his house would drop anything that they were doing at the time to help him. He spent the last years of his life constantly being reminded that he was respected and loved.

In conclusion, humility is strategic. It invites the blessing of God. Humility and the heart of a bondservant led Jesus to leave the trappings of divinity (but not divinity itself) and the glories of heaven to live as a humble servant of God, being obedient to death, even death on a cross. But that led to His exaltation, and the Name of Jesus is higher than any other name. He emptied Himself and it led to great things. Let us have the same mind. Let us think the same way.