

3/16/08

Ladder Climbers Anonymous

Philippians 2:1-11

¹If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ²then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. ³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. ⁴Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

⁵Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

⁶Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
⁷but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

⁹Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

We are quickly approaching what we call “Good Friday.” I want to ask a question, **“What’s so good about Good Friday?”**

Now had Jesus been born on Friday that would have been a Good Friday. Had Jesus healed the sick or raised the dead on Friday that would have been Good Friday. Had the resurrection taken place on Friday that would have been Good Friday. But Friday was the day that Jesus died, so what’s so good about Good Friday? I mean if you know the story it’s pretty horrific. It’s wrapped up in personal

betrayal, wrongful accusations, mocking, persecution, and torture all leading to the most inhuman and excruciating death the world has ever known. I think we struggle with the concept of Friday being Good Friday because we remember it as more of a tragic injustice, and had God not turned it into a good thing on Sunday it would have been a disastrous week-end. Yet just before Jesus was arrested he said,

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

John 12:23

As if to say, “Guys, the event that is about to take place will not only elicit praise and adoration, but more importantly, it will reveal the very essence of who I am—better yet it will reveal the very essence of who God is.

What’s so good about Good Friday? I think Paul helps with that in Philippians 2. Many scholars believe that this text is an early Christian hymn that was sung as a part of worship in the first Christian churches. That’s important because early Christian hymns give us insight into how the early church understood and celebrated the Lord Jesus. They were writing songs in their context expressing how they understood the work and the person of God. We do the same thing in our contemporary setting. That’s also why there is so much division about worship in the Church today because it portrays how we think and experience God.

So what kind of picture does the hymn paint? What story does it tell us? At first glance it seems to be retelling the three basic movements of the Christian story. The hymn begins with Jesus in his pre-earthly existence with God and as God in heaven. Then it moves to the incarnation. Which is what we celebrate at Christmas—God becoming man and dwelling among us. Then it concludes with Jesus being glorified, being exalted by God the Father and acknowledged by creation as “Lord.”

But when we look a little closer at this song, it reveals a decision that is involved in this three-fold movement of God in history. It a decision that was made before the universe began. Now here’s the decision--

⁶Who, being in very nature God,

Now the NIV presents a translation to us that infers the following: ***Jesus in spite of the fact that He was God....*** Now from a human standpoint that would make sense. Kind of like “He didn’t have to do it because he was God, and He didn’t have to serve anybody, but He did it.”

But if we put this in the context of the passage, if we understand the flow of Paul’s argument it’s exactly the opposite; it’s like *Jesus became a servant, not in spite of the fact that He was God, but because He was God!* Church, get a hold of this—it is the nature of our God to serve!

⁶Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,

Now focus on the word “grasped.” It’s the Greek word *harpagmos*. And it’s not so much about something to be taken hold of as it something to be exploited, something to be used for one’s personal gain, something to be used for one’s personal advantage.

We live in a world that is well known for its exploitation and personal gain, because the ultimate goal of most Americans is to move up the Ladder of Success.

A college student was traveling in the East, the summer before his junior year, he met a guru who said to this student, don’t you see you’re poisoning your soul with this success-oriented way of life? Your idea of happiness is to stay up all night studying for an exam so you can get a better grade than your best friend. That’s your idea of happiness? Your idea of a good marriage is not to find a woman who will match your soul, but to win the girl everybody else wants. That’s not how people are supposed to live. Come and join me and my disciples in an atmosphere where we all share and love one another. Well, this kid was ripe for his message. He called his parents and told them he was dropping out of school to live in a commune. Six months later, they got a letter from him:

Dear Mom and Dad,

I know you weren't happy about my decision, but I want to tell you how it's changed me. For the first time in my life, I'm at peace. Here there is no competing—no trying to get ahead of anyone. This way of life is so in harmony with my inner soul that in only six months I've become the Number Two Disciple in the entire community, and I think I can be Number One by June!

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even death on a cross!**

So Jesus gave up His position. He didn't consider His position something to hold on to. He gave it up and came down the rungs of the Ladder and exercised His servant nature. The *Doctrine of the Incarnation* is all about God coming down the ladder. But even on our human level, some people live like kings and celebrities, so He takes another demotion. He humbled Himself by being born in a stable to a penniless mother and father—a peasant kid. He was born as a peasant. But that's still not low enough. There's a lot of peasants in our world. He kept going down the ladder and He became "obedient to death." But it even goes a lower than that. *He became obedient to death, even death on a cross!* Now when you hit "death on a cross," you had hit bottom. In the first century there was the saying "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."

Galatians 3:13
Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."

That fate was abhorred above all others. And the fate that this Jesus, this servant of mankind was crucified stunned the world; and you

know what, if we will just consistently live and tell His story it still stuns people.

So this is a story about one who went down the ladder as far as He could go, not in spite of the fact that He was God, but He went down the Ladder precisely because He was God. May I suggest to you that in our quest to climb the Ladder it's pretty easy to go right past Jesus as He makes His way down.

Jesus began from day one demonstrating and teaching that He was coming down the ladder, and lots of people had a hard time with it because they were "climbers."

Even his disciples had a hard time with it, remember? This is from Luke 22,

Luke 22:24

And a dispute rose up among them as to which of them was considered to be the greatest.

Does anybody remember a modern-day athlete whose tag line was "I am the greatest?" Yes, Mohammed Ali. One time Ali was on a plane, and everybody was supposed to buckle up their seatbelts, but he didn't want to do it. The Flight Attendant said, "You have to put on your seatbelt."

He answered, "I'm not going to put a seatbelt on, because I'm Superman." He went on about how he didn't have to do this, and she kept telling him that he had to do it, explaining to him that it was like a safety law. They couldn't take off until he put it on. And he finally said, "I'm not going to do it, because I'm Superman, and Superman don't need no seatbelt! And she said to him, "Well then Superman don't need no airplane!"

Same thing with the disciples. "We don't need no seatbelt!" So seeing that the lecture method wasn't working Jesus decides to give them an object lesson. The most menial job you could have in that day was to be a foot-washer. Now in those days most folks wore Crox, so they were given to a lot of dirt on their feet. When it rained walkways and roads became muddy complicated by the fact that there was a lot of animal traffic on roads in Jesus' day and most their

cities hadn't passed Pooper Bag Laws. So mix all that in, and feet were not your most hygienic body part. They were considered to be quite foul. To have washed them was "Bottom of the Ladder" work.

Now on the night before Jesus was to be betrayed and given up to go to the Cross, they came together for the Last Supper--now they didn't know it was the Last Supper--but we do know that they were arguing who was the greatest among them. Maybe some of the argument ensued over who was going to wash feet? And Jesus, ***being in the very nature God***, takes a towel.

It seems to me that we don't have very many servant leadership models in our day. Can you imagine seeing Donald Trump on "The Apprentice" getting down on his knees and polishing the shoes of those folks trying to be his apprentice, his disciple?

But Jesus gets down on His knees—***being in the very nature God***—takes a basin of water and a towel and washes the nasty feet of a group of guys who were Climbers. I know it was an object lesson for them because when He finishes he says,

John 13:12-17

Do you understand what I have done? You call Me Teacher and Lord and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example...Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. [*emphasis mine*]

And so Jesus started what might be called the Fellowship of the Towel—an alternative community in a world filled with Ladder Climbers—former Ladder Climbers who drape a towel over an arm and ask "How can I serve you. How can I help you?"

Now when living in Ladderville, it's pretty hard to move from the Ladder to the Towel. And it's hard to believe but Towel Bearing brings more joy than Ladder Climbing. Many of us have already discovered the anguish of climbing the ladder only to discover that it's leaning against the wrong wall.

Jesus who went down the Ladder to its absolutely lowest rung was exalted by God to the highest place. And the day is coming Paul says when everybody is coming down off the Ladder, and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess. Can you imagine that scene?

Donald Trump will kneel. Ali will kneel. Madonna will kneel. Big Bird will kneel. Hillary will kneel. John McCain will kneel. Osama bin Laden will bow. Cocoa-leaves-chewing Hugo Chavez will bow. Crazy man Ah ma dinejad who told his country two weeks ago that they were now the one power in world, he will bow. And you and I will kneel and bow and confess to the One who humbled Himself to the lowest place because he has now been exalted to the highest place.

And did you catch what Jesus says to his followers?

John 3:17

If you know these things, blessed and happy and to be envied are you if you practice them.

Listen, Church, I'm convinced that God wants to turn the people called City View from Ladder Climbers into Towel Bearers.

Now that will get a loud "Amen" on Sunday morning. That plays to the Church galleries quite well, but I would remind you that the Ladder is very addictive. I would suggest that you can't get off it by yourself. We need help, and the One we worship today specializes in pulling down Ladders and picking up Towels. And He will help those of us who struggle with this.

And having kicked the habit ourselves, who knows, maybe we can become a Church for Recovering Ladder-Climbers. And we could start letting Ladder Climbing Addicts introduce themselves as "Hi, my name is John, and I'm a recovering Ladder-Climber."

So what do you think? What do you want to do with the rest of your life? I mean there are all kinds of ladder addictions out there. Work, academic achievement, athletic fame, physical attractiveness, the list is endless.

What about that question we started with? What's So Good About Good Friday? Church, if we can differentiate between Ladder Addictions and Towel Opportunities, that makes Good Friday really good. Because when Jesus endured shame and guilt of the cross he did so with the hope that the life lived by Him would be lived by us.