

Sermon: The World at the Foot of the Cross**Scripture: Philippians 2:1-11****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: October 1, 2023**

Christianity can appear exclusivist and narrow at times with claims from Christians about who is in God's grace and who is out, how some are saved and some are not, that there are certain things you must believe in order to receive the good news and not be stuck with the bad news. The passage that Margaret read from Paul's letter can come across as a threat I'm afraid and that's not what it was ever meant to be. "At the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." That phrase has been the driving force behind missionary work around the world, evangelism that is both well-intended and not so well-intended, helpful and harmful, blessed and cursed, as people go out to the world to teach others about Jesus. And if for some reason their knees don't naturally bend at the good news of Jesus' salvation then we'll just make their knees bend, right?

I don't believe that such exclusivism is a faithful account of what the Gospel teaches... however, there is an undeniable exclusive claim to the truth that is inherent in Christianity. The Christian faith really isn't offering one path among many. I know we in the progressive Christian community like to think of it that way but I'm not sure it's justifiable. The Christian way of framing the world and human life and its claim upon our lives is one claim of truth among many, but it's either the truth of the matter or it's not. It's more like gravity than an interesting philosophy to accept or not. Gravity is a truth about our lives that we can say we don't buy and then step off a roof as a result but there will be very real

consequences to ignoring that truth. Christianity has an explanation for life and existence, pain and suffering, good and evil, the meaning of history and the world and our place in it which is either true or it isn't, it's either an accurate account of how things are and why they are or it's not, it's a truth claim about our life which is either true or it isn't. It doesn't offer itself as one path among many, it says this is the way things are, this makes life worth living, this is the truth of the matter. For instance, our society teaches quite unequivocally in a myriad of ways that worthy goals in life are wealth, fame, and power. Christianity does not say "well, to each its own, those are good pursuits too, many paths to the truth, you know. It's all good." No, Christianity says unequivocally, "no, the truth is, at best, wealth, fame, and power are only means to an end and when they become ends they ruin things for oneself and for others. It's not all good, at all.

But it's not just about compelling and competing ideas about our existence. Our religion is not so much about universal philosophies of life as it is about a particular person who lived. It centers itself not so much on notions of truth but on the truth of a person - the birth, life, death and continuing life of a Jewish man who lived in the Middle East in Israel about 2000 years ago for 33 years. And yet, the remarkable thing is that we say the specificity of his life revealed the truth of human life and human existence fully. This is what Christianity says and, folks, either it's true or its not, either his life did reveal the true human life or it didn't.

Now where the gray comes in, cause we more progressive Christians get itchy with such black and white claims, is how we articulate and understand what exactly that good news and that truth is... but that it's a truth that is fundamental to explaining, understanding and living a flourishing human life is what Christians believe. It's not like "eh, this is one way you could go but whatever works for you."

You could go up if you step off the building, you could go down, but to each his own.” No, you step off here, you’ll go down. Similarly there was something, is something about Jesus that is essentially human or especially human or as CS Lewis suggested, finally fully human. This is human.

And if you could pick one passage to help get us to an articulation of what the fundamental Christian claim is, what is at the heart of it, this might very well be the passage to go to where Paul is writing to the church in Philippi encouraging his people to live with Christ, as Christ, in the Spirit of Christ which means with humility and care one for another as Jesus Christ did “who himself did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but humbled himself even unto death on a cross” and it’s that person, him, the humble one, the sacrificed one, who willingly suffering for the good of others that we are to kneel before and profess as Lord, as Savior, as God even in our lives.

Why we celebrate and CAN celebrate WORLD Communion and not just Winchesterian Communion or American Communion is because everyone, the whole world, has a place at the foot of the cross. What Jesus did in suffering and dying, allowing himself to be broken for others, what we bow our knees and confess with our tongues is most binding on our lives is NOT a philosophy or theory about life, not a membership in this club or that club or citizenship in this country or that country but what is binding on us and speaks to the truth of human existence is this story of LOVE, this person through whom True Love was revealed to the world. And in him is the truth to which our knees must bow – the truth that love reigns in this world and not might. That forgiveness rules in this world and not vengeance. That, despite any evidence to the contrary, finally compassion trumps being merciless. That generosity of wealth is better than

accumulation of it. That justice for all not just for a few is how it's supposed to be. That empowering others rather than exerting power over others finally in the end wins the day, just to name a few principles that Jesus embodied in his life

This is why every knee should bow to and every tongue should profess Jesus as Lord – not everyone convert to Christianity, but everyone ideally should be in pursuit of being a truly and fully human, human being. So a devout Jewish person might bend the knee to Jesus' truth more fully and beautifully than many a Christian. A Buddhist might profess Jesus as Lord in the living of a humble life more than many a Christian. A Muslim might "have the same love as Christ" as Paul put it, might "in humility show tenderness and compassion" in a way that reveals to the world the Spirit of Jesus Christ and so participates in the truth of God more than many a Christian.

And that's how we gather together across culture, across language, across race, across whatever aisle tends to separate us to celebrate this communion and even WORLD communion to come to the table of Jesus Christ, he who sacrificed himself for the sake of others and offered love and forgiveness to everyone from the least to the greatest, from the first to the last, from the smallest to the biggest and we bow our knees at this table and profess with our tongues at this table that this is fundamentally the greater truth in our world that we belong together to a God of love which is not just one truth among many but the truth of the matter, that when we gather at the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ we are necessarily brought together and bound together into our best and truest selves, Amen.