

“The Humility of God”
Philippians 2:1-11
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The funeral service for Jimmy Carter, the 39th President of the United States, was held this past Thursday at Washington’s National Cathedral, one of the great churches in the world and a place I myself have been fortunate to worship in. I listened to much of the service where speaker after speaker essentially repeated the same refrain- that he was one of the most extraordinarily humble and faith-filled human beings to ever hold the presidency. When President Biden got up to speak, he said he was the first senator to endorse Carter’s candidacy for president when most people still had no clue who he was. He said it was an endorsement based on what he believed was his most enduring attribute- his character. He said, “Jimmy Carter’s friendship taught me, and through his life taught me, that strength of character is more than title or the power we hold. It’s the strength to understand that everyone should be treated with dignity, respect. That everyone, and I mean EVERYONE, deserves an even shot. Not a guarantee, but just a shot.”

More than anything else, it was his Christian faith that informed his life. Jimmy Carter was the first President to place Human Rights at the center of his foreign policy, and it was based upon his belief in Christ’s teaching that ALL persons possessed worth and respect. He filled his administration with more women, Blacks and Latinos than any President before him and even left his own denomination--the Southern Baptists--over the church’s failure to grant full equality to females. Years after his presidency had ended, after the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union had collapsed, the then President of Russia, Mikhail Gorbachev, confessed that the PRIMARY REASON for those historic developments had been Jimmy Carter’s emphasis upon human rights more than a decade before. In fact, many consider his post-presidency to be far more successful than his years in the White House ever were with work that included building homes for Habitat for Humanity, his efforts to eradicate guinea worm and river blindness in the Third World, working for free and fair elections in countries from Nicaragua to Nepal, and brokering peace treaties among nations as he had done in 1979 with the Camp David peace accords between two countries that had been lifelong enemies of each other- Israel and Egypt. After having served as the most powerful man on earth, he didn’t want to squander that opportunity he had been given by spending the remainder of his days on a trout stream or a golf course somewhere, but to continue to use his influence to make this world a more just and habitable place for ALL of us to live in.

Earlier this week, John Thune, the current Republican Majority Leader in the Senate, recounted a story about when Carter was a young man, he went on a mission trip to Massachusetts. There, he asked a fellow missionary about his secret to success, to which the man replied, “I try to have two loves in my heart: one love is for God, and the other is for the person who happens to be in front of me at any particular time.” Thune said Carter never forget that advice, but added, “I think it’s fair to say that it’s also a statement HE HIMSELF lived by. The son of man did not come to be served but to serve, and Jimmy Carter did his very best to live according to the calling of his Lord and Savior.” Almost every weekend, the pews of his church in Plains, Georgia would be packed with visitors wanting to hear him teach his Sunday School

class and, of course, his FAVORITE book- the Bible. His marriage to Rosalyn, his wife of 77 years, was considered a love story for the ages. To the very end, they lived in same small house they purchased in 1961 and now the two of them, joined together for so long here on earth, are FINALLY AND FOREVER united in heaven.

One Sunday morning fifteen years ago, just before I left the house to lead worship for my church in Waterloo, Iowa, I saw on the television that Norman Borlaug had passed away. When I alerted the congregation of what I had seen, the reaction was a collective shock. You see, where much of the world merely shrugged their shoulders at the news of this man's death, asking "Who the heck was Norman Borlaug?" IOWANS knew ALL TOO WELL who he was. Often referred to as "the father of the Green Revolution," he was a mid-western agronomist from tiny Cresco, Iowa- a town SO SMALL, even most IOWANS wouldn't be able to locate it on any map. He is credited with having saved A BILLION LIVES through his advances in genetically-engineered crops which resulted in DOUBLING the world's wheat production. Borlaug is one of only seven people to have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (which he received in 1970 and is perhaps the highest honor that can be bestowed upon any one person), the Presidential Medal of Freedom, AND the Congressional Gold Medal. When you hear of his incredible accomplishments, you wonder how such an amazing life could have flown so far under the radar.

Gregg Easterbrook, regular columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*, apparently thought so. In an article written a few days after his death, he began by saying:

Norman Borlaug—arguably the greatest American of the 20th century—died late Saturday after 95 richly accomplished years. The very personification of human goodness, Borlaug saved more lives than anyone who has ever lived. He was America's Albert Schweitzer: a brilliant man who forsook privilege and riches in order to help the dispossessed of distant lands. That this great man and benefactor to humanity died little-known in his own country speaks volumes about the superficiality of modern American culture.

He concluded with these words:

Often it is said America lacks heroes who can provide constructive examples to the young. Here was such a hero. Yet though streets and buildings are named for Norman Borlaug throughout the developing world, most Americans don't even know his name.

The more you DO learn about this man, the greater your admiration for him as a PERSON grows. You see, Borlaug never thought of himself as anything more than an ordinary Joe- a plain-spoken, dirt-on-the-shoes plant breeder whose semi-dwarf and rust-resistant wheat varieties have been responsible for saving countless lives from chronic hunger and starvation. In fact, when he was tracked down to a wheat field fifty miles west of Mexico City and told he had just won the Nobel Peace Prize for his humanitarianism by his wife Margaret, he told her that it was some sort of prank. "Someone's pulling your leg," he insisted. Instead of welcoming all the celebrity he was about to receive, he turned around and went back into the field until his day's work was completed. Only THEN did he go to a Mexico City press conference, unwashed and still in his work clothes, because "I wanted to show the TV men what makes an agricultural scientist- dirty hands."

What an example of selfless humility these two men—James Earl Carter and Norman Borlaug--provided in light of all their status and worldly accomplishments. And it is an

example we desperately need TODAY, especially with the constant squabbling and the name-calling which seems to pass for discourse, whether it's the coarsening language and displays of disrespect between the Republicans and the Democrats in Washington, or those daily shout-fests which dominate the cable news channels, generating much more HEAT than they do real light. Understandably, the approval ratings for both Congress and the media have never been lower.

Unfortunately, we see how the same division and in-fighting which has come to characterize our national conversation has trickled down into our own communities, into our local boards and organizations, and even into those self-described "havens of peace"- our own churches. Issues over which doctrine is correct or not, or who has authority and control over what have divided the Church for the past two thousand years. This is no less true of our OWN denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA). We pride ourselves on being among the most educated and broadminded of Christian denominations and yet it consistently remains among the most fractured and divided of them ALL with factions splitting from it to become NEW churches all the time. The latest was the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians, formed more than a decade ago over our denomination's decision to approve the ordination of gays and lesbians, and allowing for same-sex marriage.

In John 17, in what is called Jesus's High Priestly Prayer, he prays to the Father that his disciples along with all FUTURE believers would be ONE even as he and his Father are ONE for it would be their UNITY, their mutuality of heart and mind and spirit and soul, which would ultimately convince the REST of the world as to the REALITY of the Godhead. In other words, he was praying that to the extent we embody that same sacrificial love in our OWN relations that he is demonstrating by going to that cross, WE thereby become the greatest witness as to the reality and truth of God. If that is the case, then the Body of Christ in the world and throughout history has done a pretty poor job of WITNESSING to that proof!

Well our text this morning provides us with an ALTERNATIVE way of living. It is Paul's model of Christian citizenship, his blueprint for the church's life. If the church is to have any witness in the world, then it will have to conduct itself in a way that is very different from how the REST of the world lives and operates. With this letter, he was addressing a congregation and a culture not altogether different from many of TODAY'S churches. The congregation in Philippi was very dear to his heart and he was terribly distressed by what he was hearing. With dissension within her ranks, members were tempted to be unloving, divisive, selfish, arrogant, and overly concerned about their own rights at the expense of others. They'd become overly competitive and showed a desire to be admired and respected by others which kept them from manifesting the presence of Christ's life amongst themselves and to others. Therefore, in verses 1-4 of our text, Paul urged them to practice humble, self-sacrificing, self-denying, self-giving service. In verse 5, he points to Christ as the one and only model for all Christians' behavior. They were to maintain among themselves the same frame of mind that Christ had when he forsook the prerogatives of heaven to become a slave among us, even going so far as to lay down his life for us by dying on a cross. Paul tells them:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name

of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

What Paul gives us here is one of the very first Christian hymns and professions of faith made by the Church. In no uncertain terms, it clearly spelled out how each and every Christian is called to live- as a servant or slave to both God and to one another in humble service even as Christ HIMSELF did. Here, Paul pleads with the Philippians to lay aside all their pettiness and divisions, their pride and personal ambitions, and to assume the same kind of humility and selflessness Jesus exemplified in his OWN life. He came NOT to assert his dominance over humanity but to serve it; NOT to perform his own will but the will of his Father in heaven; and NOT to exalt himself but to renounce his glory and become one with us that we might be reconciled back to God. If THESE were the hallmarks of Christ's life and ministry, then they can no less be the hallmarks of our OWN lives as well.

Some years ago, I led a Presbytery-wide workshop on the theme of "Christ as Servant in the Gospels," and the realization I came to then was that Jesus, as the very revelation of the face and heart of God, reveals God precisely THROUGH his servanthood, that the TRUE nature of God is that he is ABOVE ALL a SERVANT-GOD. If gentleness, meekness, and selfless love were the very qualities that characterized our LORD'S life, then they are ALSO the SAME qualities that lie at the very heart of his Heavenly Father. Where the rest of the world looks to an all-powerful, all-consuming god, a jealous god who is ready to strike down the first person to cross him, Christians honor and adore a "SERVANT God"- a God who loves us with an everlasting love, a God who never stops pursuing us even when we run from and turn our backs on him.

As you might imagine, I frequently find myself drawn into debates involving deep theological questions, discussions I enjoy immensely. When it is demanded from me that I prove to them Jesus was divine, I don't point to his many miracles or acts of healing. Miracles may demonstrate his power, but not necessarily his divinity. Rather, I point to our Lord's great HUMILITY and SELFLESS CHARACTER for THAT is where the most convincing proofs as to his divinity are to be found. I turn to the story of his birth and show how he was born in a lowly manger because there was no room in the inn. Here God allows his son to enter our world as a helpless, vulnerable, completely dependent baby and when you look at that infant, you are gazing upon the very heart of God. I then turn their attention to his ministry- his words like "I came not to be ministered unto, but to minister" and "He that would be great among you, let him be the servant of all." I remind them of his deep affection for women and outcasts, for the sick and the needy- and here in this humble activity, you see the divinity of Christ.

Then I turn to John 13, the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet, and ask them to observe the ESSENCE of servanthood. I show them where Jesus voluntarily surrenders himself to his enemies, how he is more willing to save OTHERS than himself. Like a lamb led to the slaughter, he patiently bears the abuse and humiliation of the soldiers. He is jeered at and spat upon, whipped and crucified naked between two thieves. Amidst all that undeserved suffering and revilement, he is still able to utter those well-known words of pardon from between those parched lips, "Father, forgive them." No man or woman could ever have uttered such words about his or her enemies WITHOUT divinity being in his or her life!

And so THERE is where his divinity lay- not in the miracles or supernatural healings, but in the tremendous depths of his humility and love. He showed us how the GREATEST ones are

NOT those who continually insist on their own rights, those who push all others aside as they make their way to the front of the line, those who are out to seek recognition and glory for themselves. Rather, the GREATEST in the kingdom of God are those who make themselves the LEAST here on earth, and Jesus Christ and the Jimmy Carters and Norman Borlaugs of the world are proof of that. They demonstrate how one doesn't have to be a canonized saint as Mother Teresa was made to exercise charity and humility. ANYONE of us is capable of such lowliness and devotion if only we remember the example CHRIST set before us and then allow ourselves to be INSPIRED by it- and here I address MYSELF ABOVE ALL. He calls us this morning to follow in his steps by picking up our OWN cross and then walking humbly and quietly and gently with him, for of such consists the one TRUE church- the ONLY church our Lord inhabits and the ONLY church he will ever be proud of. Let us pray...

Our Heavenly Father, forgive us for thinking that the only way we can get ahead and leave any kind of a mark is by blowing our own horn or demanding our own way or trampling over others to get to the top. May EVERYONE of us, including the newly-elected President of our nation to the CEO's of our largest corporations to the richest persons on the planet, remain mindful of this. Your Son, however, shows us ANOTHER way and that is through PATIENCE AND HUMILITY AND LOVE- THE WAY OF THE CROSS. Help us to model our lives after him and to make service to one another THE ONE GREAT AMBITION of our lives. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.