

A Question About Jesus' Authority
Matthew 21:23-32 Philippians 2:1-13

Showing “respect” and “honor” has often been a critical moment in our culture. We've certainly been hearing a lot these past years about the meaning and the ramifications of choosing to “take a knee” in some public arenas. Different sides would have us attach meaning and significance to these displays, both positive and negative.

As I studied the scripture for this week's sermon, I became aware of how this “taking the knee” controversy fits the situation Paul is addressing in his letter to the Christians in Philippi. The church there was apparently having problems with conflict and within the body. Unfortunately, we only get one side of the story with Paul's letters. We hear his response to the issue, but are not made aware of the specific situation he is responding to. However, we can determine a lot from what he says, and sometimes more importantly, by how he says it.

There seems to be an issue with some in Philippi feeling they have a better status than others. Roman culture at the time was all about one's status, which was determined by the way in which the status one has obtained. And it was determined, not only by one's integrity, by one's goodness, but also by how one participated in the civic ceremonies and civic worship of the day. Since the early Christians refused to participate in the cultic worship of the emperor as a living deity, they were considered less honorable and faced much persecution.

The emperor maintained his control by establishing himself as the hero of the country, as the one whose success maintained the well-being of the empire. To not revere and worship him, disrespected and dishonored not only the emperor, but also the country. Generals and military heroes of the time were also considered like that of the gods and almost given a divine status. The upper classes increased their honor and status by publicly supporting and idolizing these figures.

I mentioned the language that Paul uses can be very enlightening and that's particularly relevant in this situation. Paul stresses the importance of humility and serving others in today's reading. If you are making your focus on other people, you can't focus on your own honor and privilege. Your own status.

However, more important is how Paul talks about Christ in this passage. He intentionally contrasts his imagery of Christ with the propaganda of the emperor. His audience, his readers would have instantly recognized the connection. On Roman coins of the time, the emperor would be depicted above a sphere, with his foot on the sphere, stressing his dominance over the whole world achieved through military brutality and strength.

Paul contrasts this image with that of a messiah, who, "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped (something to be used to his own advantage}..." Jesus could have chosen to claim and seize dominance or equality with God, yet he choose a path of being subordinate, as Paul says, "but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant."

Paul's letter was, in effect, a rebuttal to what was often called the "Gospel of Ceasar Augustus" or what we refer to today as "The Pax Romana". All those values that were so praised in Roman culture: honor, hero worship, and excessive allegiance to imperial accomplishments and leadership, are the exact opposite to the values and example that Jesus sets. He doesn't establish his reign through violence and conflict, but through humility and service, "even to death on a cross."

The concern with maintaining honor, status, and privilege is what led Jesus to the cross. The temple leadership was threatened by one claiming to be the Messiah and keeper of the true faith. They needed to be rid of this threat which was the opposite of all those values that the emperor and the empire stood for.

By establishing the values of Christ, he's pointing out to the Philippians that the way of their worldly empire is the opposite of the kingdom they owe their allegiance to. Their interactions with each other need to reflect the same attributes of Christ: humility, service, and concern for others before oneself.

So, if Paul were asked about our current controversy concerning "taking a knee," his response would probably be "why should you care about it?" Why should the honor system of the empire be a Christian's concern?

For Paul this would be a distraction from what we are to be concerned with. Paul is clear that we are to be working to imitate the example set by our Savior. Our concern is the well-being of others; to be of service to them. Empathy is the name of the game in God's kingdom. There is no place for rivalry and conflict.

In the parable in our reading from Matthew this morning, Jesus talks about those who say one thing and do another. Do we walk around saying we follow Christ, but then not think of others before ourselves? Do we claim the Christian title (Christian status), yet participate in the imperial cultic worship of today?

The larger church to which we belong, the Church of the Brethren, has a long rich tradition of putting others before ourselves, of devoting ourselves to the service of our fellow humans. Nothing exemplifies this commitment to humility and service than the simple act of feet washing, following Jesus' example (unfortunately, something we have not practiced now for several years). Taking a knee in the service of your brothers and sisters. Kneeling and lovingly washing the feet of another is the ultimate act of humility and service to another.

As Paul advises, do we have the same mindset in us as in Christ? Do we value honor above relationships? Is our focus on worldly empires and their value and honor systems or on God's kingdom and its values of empathy and service?

I'd like to close today with a little story about distraction. A man bought a new hunting dog. Eager to see how he would perform, he took him out to track a bear. No sooner had they gotten into the woods than the dog picked up the trail. Suddenly he stopped, sniffed the ground, and headed in a new direction. He had caught the scent of a deer that had crossed the bear's path. A few moments later he halted again, this time smelling a rabbit that had crossed the path of the deer. And so, on and on it went until finally the breathless hunter caught up with his dog, only to find him barking triumphantly down the hole of a field mouse.

Sometimes Christians are like that. We start out with high resolve, keeping Christ first in our lives. But soon our attention is diverted to things of lesser importance. One pursuit leads to another until we've strayed far from our original purpose. What's important is that we don't let ourselves become distracted and caught up in the daily controversies of the world and allow ourselves to be distracted by and caught up in those dramas that run contrary to those values of Christ - we are to emulate.

And daily controversies abound these days, don't they? It seems impossible to keep on top of it all, and quite frankly, it's exhausting. But maybe that's always been the purpose of these political issues, these questions of "honor?" To keep us distracted from our true work and focus as disciples. Instead of worrying about who's right and who's wrong in the current public debate, we can turn our focus away and get back to a Jesus focus. We can ask ourselves three easy questions from our own Brethren heritage. Are we right with God and our neighbor? Are we humble and focused on God's kingdom? Are we in this world but not of this world? I hope and pray we have the right answer to those questions. May we always look around us with empathic eyes that see the world with God's lens and not the world's - and be willing to take a knee ourselves. Amen.