

**March 3, 2019 (Journey worship)**

**TEXT:** [Philippians 2:1–3](#)

**THEME:** Surrender

**Title:** Emptied and Exalted

*By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy*

Prayer of Illumination: Guide us, O God, by your Word, and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover peace; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Right in the middle of the first thirteen verses in the second chapter of Paul's epistle to the Philippians we find the Christ Hymn. Many have debated whether Paul actually wrote the hymn, or edited and used a hymn written by someone else about someone other than Christ and added the final declaration, "to the glory of God the Father." Some scholars believe and report that if this hymn was written by someone else, Paul's Philippian audience was probably familiar with the passage. None of that really matters. The salient point of Paul writing or quoting the hymn was to illustrate what we are all called to do in our living, being, and doing—surrender and empty our own self-interests, deem others above ourselves and to glorify God. This is one of my favorite passages of scripture—to think that Christ relinquished his divine placement, became human and emptied himself—for me, for us, is difficult to grasp, sometimes hard to accept and overwhelmingly convicting and humbling.

Humility, emptying, and being obedient to the point of death are not behaviors most of us ascribe to. Those behaviors connote postures of giving up, giving in, surrendering—all ring negatively in our post-modern ears. Even when we are on the wrong side of history, giving up, giving in or surrendering don't seem like the best position to be in. Generally, people are stubborn, strong willed, and determined, maybe even obstinate at times. We are all prone to only look out for what we perceive to be in our own best interests, forgetting Paul's admonition to live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel, standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side, having one mind for the faith of the gospel, as evidence of our salvation, and our unity as followers of Christ.

In preparation for the six-week study of the *Belhar Confession*, I have been researching the history of South Africa and apartheid. What occurred in South Africa and all over the world to many indigenous people is appalling. Overrun and enslaved in their own land, the indigenous South Africans were eventually out powered and overrun by White Afrikaners, who perceived it was their God given mandate to order *their* society along racial lines. They decreed that interracial sex or marriage was not allowed. All public facilities such as buses, schools, hospitals, beaches were segregated. People of color had to carry passbooks containing information about themselves. No colored person could live, work or travel without a passbook.

Surely, the people of God protested and stood against apartheid you might ask. Some did. All the white churches, except the Dutch Reformed Church which responded by establishing four churches along racial lines. Governmental and church sanctioned

segregation continued until it was finally acknowledged that apartheid was theologically counter to the gospel of Jesus Christ, a gospel that espoused love of neighbor better than self, love of God exhibited by unity and reconciliation. Consider this your invitation to join us every Wednesday at 5:00 for a simple meal and to discuss the Belhar Confession and the rejection of disunity, and injustice in society, in the church and in the world, as we are called to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who did not regard his equality with God as something to be used to his advantage. Instead, Jesus took on human likeness, surrendered, made himself nothing and was obedient to the point of death on a cross. Those are Paul's admonition to the Christians in Philippi and Christians in every time and place continuing to this very moment.

I contend that when we surrender to living as if we're in a drive through at burger king having things our way, then and only then can we be transformed from people with varied life experiences, and a variety of gifts and talents to unified siblings in Christ looking out for one another, and using our gifts, talents and resources for the benefit of all, most especially for those who have need. Beloved, unity is not the same as uniformity—we were each created in the image of God: unique, fearfully, and wonderfully made to live in a manner worthy of the gospel, looking to the interests of others above our own.

Commentator Mick Graves states that “one does not ‘self-empty’ by focusing on oneself. One is emptied of self to the degree one is overcome by the needs, pains, hopes and desires of others. When concern for others take one utterly beyond self-interest, beyond obsession with achievements...then one receives the comfort of an Easter ‘yes’ so overwhelming, unconditional, undeniable, and absolute that is experienced as unfailing and forever.”

Surrendering our selfish motives, our misdirected intentions, our self-serving positions, and our misguided suppositions, makes room for us to love one another and to love God as we are loved. Paul's final call in this passage is for us to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, is followed by the reminder that it is God who is at work in us. It is only by and with God's help that we can truly surrender all, and work to dismantle segregation, injustice, disunity and class systems. The Lenten season is upon us, and many of us will contemplate what to give up, or forgo these next forty days as a spiritual practice. Perhaps instead we should more appropriately contemplate what to give.

As we gather at table may we remember him who surrendered, and gave it all, and was exalted, not for his own vainglory or recognition, not even for an Easter, resurrection morning, rising from the dead yes, but because it was who and what he came to do, empty himself to the point of death on the cross, embodying and exemplifying God's unchanging, unconditional, everlasting love for us. Beloved, in Jesus Christ although we

are broken we are blessed; although we are self-serving we have received salvation; although we grasp for recognition and acknowledgment and accolades we are seen gracefully as the children of God; although we are sometimes faithless, he is ever faithful. That's the good news of the gospel, beloved, and in the words of Paul: all to the glory of God. Amen.