

Philippians 2: 1-13: Where I heard the good news in today's reading (5/13/18)

When Pastor Laura asked me to speak this Sunday, she told me that today's reading included what is commonly referred to as the "Christ Hymn." Reading verses 5-11 of Philippians Chapter 2 immediately evoked for me a music-related memory. What is a music-related memory? Scientific research shows that music can trigger especially intense memories and in particular the emotions associated with those memories. I have many music-related memories associated with church. Some of you know my father was a Lutheran Church Missouri Synod pastor. I attended church practically every Sunday of my childhood and adolescence. We even went to church when we were on vacation!

The Christ Hymn recalled for me singing the Matins Liturgy. When the "new" blue hymnal came out in the early '80's, my father tried out all of the "new" liturgy settings. Liturgy, for those of you who are not church nerds like me, is a form or pattern of worship, parts of which are usually sung. Elements of the liturgy we commonly sing here at River of Hope include the Kyrie (Lord have Mercy); the hymn of praise (This is the Feast); the gospel alleluia, sung after the reading; and the Lamb of God before communion.

Singing the liturgy has always been one of my favorite parts of worship, maybe because I just like to sing. The Matins was like not other liturgy I'd sung before. It was chant-like, not as melodic and hymn-like as "Setting Two," which we sang most Sundays. But I loved Matins, especially the Te Deum, the post-sermon canticle. After three verses of praise to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together, the key would drop and we would begin to chant a section praising Jesus that resembles the Christ hymn:

“When you took it upon yourself to deliver man,
you humbled yourself to be born of a virgin.
When you had overcome the sharpness of death,
you opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.
You sit at the right hand of God,
In the glory of the Father.
We believe that you will come
To be our judge.”

Although I found out the Te Deum is very old (like 4th century AD old), I couldn't confirm who wrote it or if it takes its words from Paul's Christ Hymn. A question I had was **was** Paul's hymn **a hymn**? Did people sing it in the early church? Pastor Laura wasn't sure at the time I

asked her, and the information I found was inconclusive. Some sources think Paul was referring to a hymn or a part of liturgy already in use; others that Paul wrote the poetic verses himself.

Is the hymn an allusion--an appeal to the Philippians' music-related memory? This seems the most logical to me. The words would evoke the music which would evoke--what?

Taken in the context of not only the verses before and after the hymn, but also the chapter before, Paul strikes me as making an appeal. Consider the situation in Chapter 1--Paul is writing to the church in Philippi from prison. Leaders have stepped up to continue the preaching of the gospel in Paul's absence, but, apparently, according to verses 15-17 of chapter 1 the motives of some of the new leaders have been questioned. Paul is no doubt concerned about what will happen to the newly formed church. He wants to remind them of who they are.

Verses 1-4 of Chapter 2 (quoted from the New International Version) are full of words to remind the Philippians (and us) of who they are: "encouragement," "united with Christ," "comfort," "like-minded," "having the same love," "being one in spirit and purpose," "humility."

Then Paul breaks into the "Christ Hymn," recalling for his readers the music of their community, which expresses so eloquently who unites them--who unites **us**, who we are united to be and what we are united to do: to serve, to praise.

And "**Therefore**" Paul continues in verse 12--and using the words now of the Message translation--"simply keep doing what you have done from the beginning."

Remember who you are. Be Christ in the world. Be the Church.

It's easy to focus on the implied discord or potential for discord in these verses: "envy and rivalry" (1:15), "stirring up trouble (1:17), "selfish ambition" (2:3), "complaining and arguing" (2:14). When I was researching, I found an especially salty (as my students would say) sermon from Martin Luther that focuses on the "the indolence and negligence displayed by Christians in this matter of loving." We certainly live in a time of divisions and discord, and often those of us who name ourselves Christians are as guilty as the rest of the world of encouraging those divisions and that discord.

BUT, to me, the positive message is clear, as can be seen in the verses following today's reading: Be "the children of God...shine like stars" Paul encourages his readers in verse 15.

Remember who you are: Christ **in** the world as Christ **was** in the world: healing, feeding, forgiving, serving, loving.

Remember who you are, Paul is saying. Be Christ in the world. Be the church.