

# “The Transformation of the Human Spirit: 2) The Meaning and the Means”

a sermon by

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Text: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave... (Philippians 2:5-7a).

Several months ago I came across an address to a group of ministers by Craig Barnes, who is the pastor of the Shadyside Presbyterian Church and Professor of Leadership and Ministry at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. The title of the address was “Sometimes Ministry Stinks”. In it he referred to a time when as a young pastor, he was discouraged in his ministry and went to visit Bryant Kirkland, who was the minister of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York. Kirkland’s advice to this young minister was this: “If you get stuck holding the bedpan, carry it like a queen.”

Kirkland related to Craig Barnes an occasion some years ago when one of Kirkland's daughters was born. He was impressed by the quality of the nurses who cared for his wife and new baby. When Kirkland complimented one of the nurse supervisors who had cared for his wife, the supervisor responded by saying, "We tell our nurses that there are a lot of smell jobs in our profession, but every job can be conducted with dignity. Our motto is this: 'If you get stuck holding the bedpan, carry it like a queen. Then the focus isn't on the bedpan, but on the graciousness of the one who is holding it.'"

Barnes went on to say to this group of ministers that there are a lot of smelly jobs in pastoral ministry. For example, churches often attract odd people. That is part of our business. As one Seminary professor put it, 'If you want to be the light of the world, you have to expect to attract a few moths.'

Sometimes ministers are called upon to fire unproductive staff members, meet with chronic complainers, wade into conflicts between different cliques in the church, and represent unpopular changes being proposed by the church board. These are smelly jobs, but someone has to do them and often that someone is the one person who is actually paid to come to church.

## I.

Over the four Sundays of June we are looking again at one of the most important books in the New Testament, Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. The city of Philippi was located on the Egnation Way and served as an important commercial center between East and West. It took its name from Philip of Macedon, who was the father of Alexander the Great. At the time of Paul the city of Philippi served as Roman colony, an administrative center of the Empire, whose inhabitants were Roman citizens and whose official language was Latin. Some of what we know about the church at Philippi is given to us by Luke in the Book of Acts (Acts 16:11-40). While in Asia, Paul received a vision from a Macedonian inviting him to come to Macedonia and give assistance to the citizens of Philippi. During his stay at Philippi Paul met a person named Lydia, who was instrumental in founding the church there. While at Philippi, Paul also was imprisoned.

The Book of Philippians contains some very important themes that occur in Paul's letters. This past week we spoke of "When Bad Things Turn Out Good". This morning we deal with the question of "The Meaning and the Means"

## II.

One of the points that Paul makes to the church at Philippi is that authentic leadership in the church is leadership in the example of Christ.

Paul illustrates the principle of leadership by introducing a poem or hymn that extols the example of Christ. Scholars are uncertain whether this hymn was composed by Paul or whether it was a hymn already at use in the church. It is sometimes referred to as the 'kenosis' hymn, because it speaks of Christ as one who did not count equality with God something to be grasped,

but who emptied himself, taking the form of a servant and becoming obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

The Christian community saw in the birth and death of Christ the supreme example of Christian service. Two weeks ago, when I was in Italy, I had the opportunity to visit the town of Mantua, which is in the Northern Part of Italy and was the center of the Renaissance in the North. The architect of the beautiful cathedral (or Duomo) was great Alberti, who was one of the four major architects of the Renaissance. The origin of the church there goes back to an ancient legend one of the soldiers who was present at the crucifixion of Christ had taken some of the dirt that bore Christ's blood and had brought it to Italy. The church is built on the spot where this dirt containing the blood of Christ is now buried. As I left the church there was a sign that said, "Do not forget that Christ died for you."

Paul, in writing to the church at Philippi reminded that that Christian service is always rooted in our response to what Christ has done. We love because he first loved us. We serve because Christ himself has served us.

Now there are many ways that people serve in a church. Some work at Loaves and Fishes, others at the Urban Ministry Center or with Camp Grier. Others teach in the Church School, sing the choir, drive vans, and serve as elders and deacons.

But there is another kind of service that is greatly needed today. Tom Friedman wrote recently in the New York Times about the great need for leadership within the business community, particularly for those who serve as corporate CEO's and others in positions of great power. Friedman observed through his travels in Europe and in Asia a common theme: there is a great concern about what is happening in the United States today. We are a nation that appears to the world around as adrift. We do not have an adequate plan to deal with the severe environmental problems that beset our planet. We do not have an energy policy that enables us to become less dependent on foreign oil. We do not have a plan to reduce the enormous debt that threatens to strangle us. We do not have a plan to provide adequate medical care to the people of this country.

Where are the leaders? Where are the statesmen? Where are the business people, the attorneys, the doctors, the ministers who know that if the parts are to succeed that the whole has to function.

### III.

Then, too, Paul reminds us that following Jesus always calls us to a higher loyalty that the loyalty to self-fulfillment and self realization.

In Eberhard Bethge's classic biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, there is a brief section that bears the title "Colonel Oster". Hans Oster was an officer in the German Wehrmacht, whom Bonhoeffer had met during the darkest days of 1939 and 1940. During these meetings they agreed to be a part of a group that was planning to assassinate Adolph Hitler. During that critical

time Colonel Oster decided that he must inform the Dutch of the date of the coming attack by the Germans on the Low Countries and thereby bring a stop to Hitler's successes which were bringing disaster on Germany. "So", writes Bethge, "the patriot had to perform what in normal times is the action of a scoundrel. "Treason" had become true 'patriotism', and what was normally 'patriotism' had become 'treason'.

Bonhoeffer himself was already on that 'way back to simplicity and straightforwardness.' In his Ethics he wrote:

"We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds; we have been drenched by many storms; we have learned the arts of equivocation and pretence;"

From where I stand today I believe that the church needs more than ever people of simplicity and straightforwardness. We too have learned the art of equivocation and pretence.

Over the years I have had great appreciation for the novels of Elie Wiesel, the Hungarian Jew who survived the holocaust and lived to write about it. There are three of his novels that relate in some detail his experiences in Auschwitz: Night, Dawn, and The Town Beyond the Wall. In his novels there are three very distinct characters. One is the victim. In Wiesel's novels the victims are the Jews, who were rounded up and herded in cattle cars to Auschwitz and the other death camps. But there is another character, the executioner. The role of the executioner belongs the Nazi soldiers who were responsible for the death of six million Jews. But Wiesel knows a third type of character, the 'spectator'. The spectator is the face of the person who stood by while the Jews were rounded up and did nothing. In Wiesel's novel The Town Beyond the Wall a young man who has survived the concentration camps by the name of Michael goes back to the city in Poland where he had lived. As he approaches the center of the city, where the Jews were rounded up, he is haunted by a face in the window. It was the face of the spectator, a man in a window above the square, who watches with indifference as the Nazi soldiers round up the Jews.

Wiesel concludes that one can pity the victim. One can hate the executioner. But for the 'spectator' there is only contempt.

I wonder how many of us, if we were honest, would have to admit that for the most part we are 'spectators' in life. We don't want to get involved. We don't like conflict. We don't want people to dislike us. So we take the easy way out.

"When Christ calls a man," Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in The Cost of Discipleship, he calls that person to come and die." The Apostle Paul, in describing the work of Christ, described it as the work of one who 'did not count equality with God as something to be grasped, but who emptied himself and took the form of a servant, and became obedient even to the point of death on a cross.

Often in conversations with people today I hear men and women who say that they feel certain emptiness in their lives. They have nice homes. They have nice cars. They have good jobs that pay handsome salaries. But if they are honest with themselves, they will also say that there is certain emptiness in their lives, a certain void that they long to fill.

John Calvin, the great Reformer of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century understood that the Christian calling in terms of embodying the purposes of God in human history. Calvin thought of God as activity, energy, moral purpose and intentionality. He believed that every human life had a purpose and that purpose was rooted in God's intentionality and purpose. Some years ago, when I visited the city of Geneva, Switzerland, where Calvin lived and worked, a member of our group asked to see the grave of Calvin. Our guide responded by saying there was no grave. Calvin had insisted that his body be buried in an unmarked, pauper's grave. You see, Calvin believed that our journey on this earth was temporary. We were to use Augustine's phrase, 'resident aliens'. We belong to another city, a city not made with human hands.

May God grant us wisdom and courage for the living of these days.

Amen