

Motivational Speech
A sermon preached by Katherine Cooke
July 18, 2010
First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC
Phil. 2:1-13

Anna and I were about as different as two people could be. She was in her early 40's, a single mother, a Buddhist from Vietnam who had made her home in Atlanta for the past 11 years or so. Anna's whole world was her apartment, her minimum wage job, her son and her grandmother. Anna spoke very little English, and often had to rely on her 7 year old son to interpret for her.

When we met, I had just finished my second year of seminary, and was spending my summer in Atlanta as a chaplain intern with Hospice, hoping to gain pastoral experience and a greater understanding of the challenges and complexities of terminal illness and what individuals and families experience as they face the end of a life.

Anna and I met under excruciatingly difficult circumstances for her. Her grandmother, in the last days of her battle with cancer, had been brought to the inpatient Hospice center, where she would be made comfortable in her final days of life. It was clear to the staff that she had just a few days to live. It was clear to me, and I was still pretty new to Hospice. But it was not clear to Anna.

When we met, Anna was hysterical. She was terrified at the prospect of losing her grandmother, her only tie to home and family, her only source of support. She was confused about what was happening, and in some ways, she was in denial. She just wanted her grandmother to get better and come home.

Anna wanted to be with her grandmother constantly, to talk to her and feed her traditional Vietnamese dishes, believing that by doing so, she could help bring healing to her grandmother. But she couldn't be there all the time because she had to go to work or she'd lose her job. She also had to find after school care for her son, because up until this point, her grandmother had been his only other caregiver. And she had to do all of this relying on public transportation and her very limited English.

Anna's situation was extreme. Not only was she dealing with the impending grief of losing someone she loved, she was also dealing with the reality that she was about to lose her only remaining link to her home and her culture, her support and, on a practical level, her only caregiver for her son.

We spent a lot of time together over the course of a few days. As a chaplain, it was my job to provide spiritual support as I could, but there were some real challenges I faced in my attempts to provide comfort to Anna.

One was my dearth of knowledge about Buddhism. With Christian families, I at least had some words to say, prayers that I could offer with them. With Anna it was different, and though I

prayed silently as I sat with her, I did not have a lot of words to offer to give her what I thought would be meaningful spiritual support. And then there was the challenge of the language barrier.

Although, for the most part, we were able to understand one another, there were several times we had to rely on her young son to translate, and it was difficult for both of us to see this young boy put in the middle of a conversation about such adult topics.

Yet despite these challenges, I felt a connection with Anna, and along with the rest of the staff, I wanted to do whatever I could to make her days there as comfortable as possible. And so much of my time with Anna was spent at her grandmother's bedside, silent.

As is typical of the Hospice experience, there was a team of people on hand to support Anna, her grandmother and her son. Doctors, Nurses, Social Workers- everyone I encountered that summer had a clear calling to this particular work, and exercised that calling with compassion and care.

The staff was able to do some concrete things to help Anna and her family. We called in a local Buddhist priest who prayed with them and offered to be there to say traditional prayers at the time of death. We connected Anna with a local Vietnamese community center, which could help her with a variety of needs, including child care and English classes. But most of all, we sat with her, we hugged her, and we let her grieve in the way she needed to grieve.

One day, after I'd been visiting with Anna and her grandmother for a while, I got up to leave the room. Anna looked up at me and on her face was a mixture of shyness and confusion and she said, quite simply, "I don't understand why everyone here is being so nice to me."

I think that it is safe to say that, up to that point, Anna had not met a lot of compassion in her life. She had a lonely existence, separated from home, family and culture. And it was about to get a whole lot lonelier.

Then she found herself and her family in a place where, while the worst thing imaginable was happening, there were people around her whom she'd never met, who were very different from her, yet who wanted to help her, and her family. She was overwhelmed, and a little bit confused.

I don't understand why everyone here is being so nice to me.

Anna's comment, made at one of the lowest points of her life, really made me think. While I like to think that I live in a society in which the needs of other people matter, one in which people generally do the right thing, do right by one another, I know that I don't have to look very far to see compelling evidence to the contrary.

I do believe that it is in our human nature to care for one another, but the reality is that we do not always put the needs of others before our own, like this morning's text asks us to.

If we are honest with ourselves, I think most of us would realize that, too often, we are so concerned with our own lives, our own issues, our own opinions and concerns that we can't

really bring ourselves to focus on the lives, issues or concerns of other people for very long. When we hear about other peoples' needs, it is easy to think, well, I have needs too, and I just can't handle this right now.

And sometimes we are so convinced of the immediacy of our own needs, or the rightness of our own stances that we not only disregard the needs of others, we willfully roll right over them.

There is no question that our society is in a state of great polarization. We are "sided up" all over the place. Opinions on political matters and family matters, issues of healthcare and education and religion and even recreation now seem to divide us more often than they unite us. We are at a point in our history when it seems more important for us to be right than to be compassionate. Whether in our families or our neighborhoods, at work or at church, we seem to think that proving our point, getting our way, making our voices be heard, is the highest, most immediate goal to achieve.

And often when we do that, we do so without thinking of the consequences to other people. If my goal is to make people see my point, if I am so concerned with my own opinion about something that it becomes the motivation for my actions, then it is very easy for me to become blinded to the opinions, thoughts and feelings of another person.

Spending time with Anna brought that into clear focus for me. I worked with a number of people from different religious traditions during my time with Hospice. I suppose that could have been a problem. Had my focus been on their religious beliefs rather than their human situation, I could have seen my role much differently. Had I been convinced that they were handling their problems all wrong, and been sure that I had the answer that would free them from their own ignorance, it would have been a very different experience.

However, I know with certainty that, had I proselytized or preached at Anna, or any other person with whom I interacted that summer, I would have been wrong. There is a time and a place for articulation of religious, political or moral ideology, but there are more times and places in our lives in which those things are not appropriate. We all encounter situations every day in which people do or say things that we disagree with. It is challenging to live and work and play and worship with people who think or live or act differently from ourselves. But it is what we are called to do.

We live in a constant state of conflict between our desire to be right and our call to be loving. It's hard to know how we are to follow Christ in a world in which opinions and sides seem to be the most important defining mark of any human.

But we can take heart, because while it is easy for us to look around and worry about where our society is headed, it's important that we recognize that, throughout history, humans have struggled with many of the same concerns we face today. We certainly read about it in scripture, and Paul's letters to the churches of his time provide us with some of the best counsel about the challenges of being human in community.

In this morning's text from Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, we are challenged in no uncertain terms to take a hard look at how we are to live as individuals and as a community, how we interact with others, what motivates us to do what we do.

Calling us to cast aside selfish ambition, conceit and our own interests, Paul reminds us that the only human being who ever had the right or the position to act however he wanted, to treat people however he wanted, to regard himself as better than everyone else was Jesus Christ. There are those we all know who seem to think that they are God, but Jesus Christ really was God. Yet, as Paul testifies, Jesus did not use his deity to demean others. On the contrary, he emptied himself. He lived a selfless, obedient life, and then died a selfless, obedient death.¹

Knowing that should- no, it must- change our lives. To be followers of Christ means that we follow Christ. We don't just admire him and praise his works.

Christ came that our lives would forever be transformed- that we would be forgiven of our sins and counted righteous in God's sight, and- this is a big and- that we would live our lives in selfless obedience to God's will, which includes, indeed is shaped around, loving and caring for other human beings. If that matters to us, and Paul assumes that it does, then it will change our lives.

Earlier this month, I spent a week in Minneapolis, serving as Commissioner to the 219th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). In the months leading up to GA, I had many conversations with people who warned me that it would be a tense time, full of conflict about the many issues facing our denomination and the church as a whole. As you might imagine, I entered that week with a little bit of trepidation.

While it is true that there was conflict, and there were plenty of people willing and ready to make impassioned pleas about issues close to their hearts, my abiding memory of that time is one of community. I was impressed with the richness of our denomination and the commitment of people across lines of age, race, gender, theological belief and ideological stance to the foundations of our denomination as well as to its future. In the midst of the polity and parliamentary procedure, I noticed more camaraderie and connection than conflict and discord. It was a nice surprise.

There were, as you can imagine, a lot of people who spoke that week. Some said profound and moving things, some said other things. One whose words spoke powerfully to me is a Minister colleague from right here in Charlotte. Jim Szeyller is the pastor at Carmel Presbyterian Church, and for the past two years he has served as the moderator of the denomination's Task Force on Civil Union and Marriage Issues. To say the least, this was a job that had the potential for significant conflict.

In his address to the Assembly to introduce the Task Force's report and ask for its approval, Jim shared a little bit of the process that the group went through to get to the point they did. He spoke of the bible study, devotions and prayers that joined this group of twelve people across their ideological differences. When he talked about his fellow task force members there was

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, Phil. 2.

sincere compassion and respect. He acknowledged that they faced the same divisive bitterness that any other group would when they got to the meat of the matter and their own views on the issues before them came into focus. But then he said, “The Spirit called us to a new thing.” I’d like to share with you, in Jim’s own words, what that new thing is.

He said, “We- each of us individually and collectively- have been bought at far too high a price to continue demeaning each other in such hurtful and alienating ways. Therefore... we are calling on each of you to close and leave forever behind your theological bunkers and to put away your oratorical and editorial hand grenades. It’s time to chain up the pit bulls on each side- those whose identity and purpose have been found only in conflict, not resolution; heat, not light. It is time to find a still more excellent way... [so] that a broken and hurting world might look on us and say, in contrast to the secular world around them, that even in the midst of disagreement, look at how those Presbyterians love one another.”

“Look at how those Presbyterians love one another.” Talk about a more excellent way. Imagine if we were to really take to heart Paul’s word to the Philippians, cast aside our own need not only to be right, but to be heard and acknowledged as being right and seek to allow our minds to be transformed to the mind of Christ. What might happen if, instead of trying to change the world to fit our purposes, we allowed God to change us to fit God’s purposes?

The Christian life demands that we move ourselves away from the center and put God at the center. Where God can be *at work in us, enabling us both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

Imagine a world in which God’s good pleasure was the only motivating factor behind human behavior.

I can’t help but wonder if then there might be fewer people who expressed genuine surprise when they experienced the unsolicited kindness of complete strangers.

Let us pray.