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Sermon: Goldfish and the Grind  
Text: Philippians 2:1-13  
October 1, 2023

Philippians 2:1-13

2 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2 make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was<sup>a</sup> in Christ Jesus,

6 who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

7 but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

8 he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

9 Therefore God also highly exalted him

and gave him the name

that is above every name,

10 so that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11 and every tongue should confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

12 Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

I think Ted Lasso thinks it would be good for us all to have the memory of goldfish because we are just so risk averse. In case you are unfamiliar with the American football coach turned English Football (soccer) coach on the fictional Apple Tv show. Ted Lasso is not hired for his coaching genius, but is hired out of spite; and being a goldfish is just one of many of Ted's life lessons. The goldfish, he teaches, is the happiest animal in the world because it has a ten-second memory.' The lesson: we tie ourselves in knots, we are afraid to take risks because of our memory of all that has or could go wrong, we hold grudges, we have long memories, better to be a goldfish, with a short-memory, and on to the next thing, not weighed down by a past we cannot change as we often pray in our prayer of confession. Be a goldfish. A good lesson, particularly for a player who is overthinking or dwelling on a past mistake and unready for the moment. But I'm glad we don't all have memories of goldfish and I am not sure that having a 10-second memory would automatically make us all happier or improve ourselves or the world around us. Don't call me a Ted Lasso hater, but maybe just not a kool-aid drinker. At least on the subject of goldfish.

Here's why: most if not all of scripture is a shared memory. It's Israel's collective memory of their trials and tribulations, their memories of their struggles, their failures, and also to be sure, the memory of God's presence, God's deliverance, and God's expectations for their lives in the midst of it all. Memory is important. Memory is a grace. Many years ago I visited a church member who was in assisted living and dealing with memory challenges related to dementia and the onset of Alzheimer's disease. For 15 minutes or so we had a bit of a circular conversation, covering the same topics again and again, asking the same questions and discussing the same things again and again. But before it was time to leave, we had a prayer and then went into the Lord's prayer. In spite of the memory lapses, in spite of the uncertainty and loss of some short-term memory, she prayed every word of the Lord's prayer and still knew it by heart. The memory of praying that prayer in year after year of Sunday School classes or gathered around the family table or seated in that third pew from the back created deep

patterns in her mind and grooves on her heart and marks on her soul that continue to form her life in spite of the challenges she was facing. Whatever else was happening in her life and in her memory, she still had been graced with a memory that pointed her from whence her help comes. Sometimes our memory is the only thing that reminds us of who we are and to whom we belong. Israel's memory reminded the exiles that they had not been abandoned to obscurity, but that the Lord would restore them to Zion. The collective memory of Jesus' ministry, life, passion and resurrection are what ragtag gatherings of Christians would tell each other as they met week after week, to bear witness to these things that had taken place and to live as Christ's disciples moving forward. Nothing was written down. All they had to go on was the collective memory of those who had seen it, experienced it, and lived it.

In fact, in our passage today from Philippians, Paul is relying on the early church's memory when he launches into the second half our lesson, ripping verses 6-11 right out of their earliest memories. 'Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.' I know it is hard to tell because we don't have the music, but basically to the early Christian community, hearing Paul launch into those words would be like me launching into a rendition of Amazing Grace or Jesus, Love Me. You don't need the hymnal in front of you because it is so familiar and whether you know it or not, the words are so familiar they have become a part of you too. Hearing verses 6-11 in our passage would have had the same effect on Paul's hearers and the congregation in Philippi to whom he was writing. Paul was reminding them of who they were and who Christ is by appealing to their songbook and their communal memory; calling them back to words everyone knew by heart.

And those words are about a Christ who becomes in the philosopher Kierkegaard's words, the divine *igcognito*, forfeiting the majesty, power, exaltation of divinity and entering into Palestinian Jewish flesh and blood, and taking, not the form of a high ranking official or religious teacher everyone would know and respect, but a peasant Rabbi who disrupted the establishment, but who also set at table with tax collectors and the like that even the most progressive of his day would have shunned. Our passage reminds us that perhaps could have been just fine without emptying himself, becoming lowly, and being found in human likeness. God could have

stayed comfortable in the trappings of divinity, keeping distance and sovereignty from afar, maintaining the majesty and mystery without having to draw near, but God takes the risk of forfeiting all the attributes, comfort, and friendly confines of God's divinity, by becoming vulnerable, becoming one of us, putting his life in the hands of a nothing special low ranking Galilean couple from a part of Israel that everyone looked down on and a place nobody expected much wisdom, faithfulness, and transformation to come from. God is unafraid to place the whole enterprise in their hands, God is enough of a chance to come in this particular life to transform our way of life, even when there were no guarantees. But God does God's best work, not fat and happy and comfortable and unmoveable in divinity, but by placing all that on hold to embrace humanity from within. There is a certain brazenness to what God does by entering our humanity and becoming one of us in Jesus Christ. There are a lot more risk averse ways to transform humanity and redeem creation; but God invests his full life in the project come what may, making an abundant life out of what does not seem to add up to much and finding room for all kinds of specimens of humanity who don't seem to add up to much either, only to find that this is what God does wherever God goes.

And so in the grind of life, participating in the life of a Christian community, showing up here,trans and committing some of your resources to the work we do, is one of the most bold and life giving and inspired things you could do with your lives. We are sold the lie that we can never have enough resources, that real happiness and flourishing in life are found through getting, amassing, and adding to our resources. But if that is true that Philippians 2 is a lie. If that is true, then God would never have needed to leave God's divinity, empty God's divinity, or forfeit God's divinity to become one of us. Just stay up there...add to your majesty and sovereignty and richness, don't sully yourself down here, don't risk your reputation and all your divine trappings by giving it up to become human and live our lives. Play it conventionally, frugally, logically God. Don't become what we are. But God shows us that we find our lives, not by amassing, protecting, conserving, and adding a little bit more to all that we have. But that we find our lives by giving what we think is important, what we think is significant, what we think is costly, to the effort and way of life that is tethered and attached to Jesus Christ. We risk all that we have and all that we are on the community that he has called us to be. We bet all that we are and all that we have

on the community that he has called us to be. We invest all that we have and all that we are on the community that he has called us to be.

Yes, and what about the benefits and what about the impact? I read a quotation from the 16<sup>th</sup> century humanist and Catholic reformer Erasmus who said that the point of theological study is not to learn a lot so we can win all the religious arguments or put forward the most convincing propositions and beliefs, but the point of theological study is to grasp the poetics of scriptural discourse and to let it make a better person of you. I believe that by the way. I shutter when I think about the person I would be without the church's role in my life. Without people in my life who loved me when I was unloveable, who taught me the importance and gift of song in the life of Christian community, people who invested in me even when I was ungrateful or took it for granted or thought I deserved it. People who came to occupy a place in the heart and in small ways illustrated to me the goodness of the gospel, the warmth of God's love, and the steadfast faithfulness of God through all the seasons of life.

But even saying 'church makes us better people' is not why we give, why we devote ourselves to the life we share here, why make our pledges and give our resources to the mission and work of this community. We do it because of Philippians 2. Because we follow a God who refuses to be God by staying put or by preserving his divinity away from any risks or potential threats. We do it because life is not found and life is not lived in getting, maintaining, preserving, but in giving, risking, and self-emptying. Or in Jesus way with words: we find our lives by giving them away, not trying to preserve them from harm, decay, or risk.

So may we find abundance not in what we have or possess but in what we are able to give, may we find abundance not in what we know but in the quality of people we become, and may we find abundance not in what we can amass but in the lives we shape and affect for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. And even if we have a memory of a goldfish, may we never forget that God is unafraid to become something small and give it worth, value, and hope. And so may we all experience the richness of such a life, not by what we are able to get, but by whatever we are able to give. Thanks be to God.