

Good news for whom? (Philippians 2:5-11)

What heals me may harm another.

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April 12, 2019

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These days it can be difficult to know how best to preach and teach the way of Jesus Paul describes in Philippians 2. Is it still a way worth following? Or is it a relic that has been so compromised by misuse that it is best left behind?

The language of obedience, submission, self-sacrifice, and putting the needs of others before our own can be heard as advocating acceptance of abuse and violence from those in authority. The unwillingness of patriarchy and privilege to lie down once and for all adds a toxic residue to such traditional scriptural language. We cannot pretend that it is not there.

But, in my opinion, neither can we abandon the countercultural pathway described by Paul. It is still the way of Jesus.

We are blessed to live in an era of increased awareness of the varieties of oppression and how they function and intersect. We are blessed that this increased awareness is, in many quarters, leading to increased efforts to identify abuse and to work toward its prevention. We still have a long way to go. But it feels as though the light is finally exposing truths long hidden under the twin mantles of clerical authority and the defense of institutions.

One of the blessings of this increasing awareness is the opportunity it gives for preachers and teachers of scripture to reckon with the fact that each of us hears and responds to it uniquely. In much of the church, the operating assumption for

generations was that whatever the text meant to the (male) preacher, it obviously meant the same to everyone else. A straight, white, male interpreter was the norm, and there was no need to question or challenge this. It simply was.

Today we know better. Or, more truthfully, today we have ample opportunity to know better. We are aware that members of our communities come from a variety of experiences and locations that impact the way they hear the good news. The gospel is no longer a one-size-fits-all message offered in the voice of a straight, white male. It is a multi-edged sword that we must handle with care.

That doesn't mean we try to blunt its edges. But we are obligated to attend to the fact that what heals me may harm another, that what resonates with me may ring false to someone else.

Philippians 2 is, for me, one of the loveliest and most challenging portions of the New Testament. It calls me to consider my privilege. It calls me to attend to the needs of others. It calls those of us with institutional power to admit that we have it, and then learn how to give up our tendency to exploit it. It insists that I resist the temptation to speak as though whatever I say comes from Christ and to pretend that what I say is all that needs to be said. It calls me to let the mind of Christ be in me.

This means, I believe, reckoning with the fact that our congregations and communities are not made up only of people like me. It means remembering that, while Philippians 2 can be heard by those of us in positions of power as liberating good news, it can be heard by others as a word condemning them to remain in situations of oppression. It seems to me that we must learn to take care and make clear what it is we are inviting people into when preaching from Philippians 2. We must attend to the variety of ways people hear our proclamation of the way of Jesus.

This is always a wise approach to preaching and teaching. But it seems especially necessary in our particular cultural moment.