

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Give Up “I’m Better”

Philippians 3:1-11

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Spoken Word –

Today as we begin worship I invite you to imagine for a minute all the times you have been told this week, to be a certain way. Our culture is obsessed with us being better and better. The right products to be better, the specific goal our career should reach to be better than our neighbor, how our house should look better than our neighbors, or even the way we compare one another consistently.

I am better is something that only goes so far in the gospels though, Jesus is not looking for people who are better than others, he is seeking for people to follow their call, their God given gifts God has given will alleviate pain and bring compassion to the world. Today as we begin worship, begin to think of all the ways you tell yourself each day you should be better, and then prepare to let those go and trust the enough that is you, and God’s message that you are enough the way you are, to accomplish God’s goals and to bring God’s kingdom on earth.

Sermon -

Today we continue our sermon series on Philippians by studying how we might give up our, “I’m better” and instead begin to recognize how living in community takes lifting up the gifts, strengths and abilities of those around us.

Philippians 3:1-11 Common English Bible (CEB)

3 So then, my brothers and sisters, be glad in the Lord. It's no trouble for me to repeat the same things to you because they will help keep you on track. ² Watch out for the "dogs." Watch out for people who do evil things. Watch out for those who insist on circumcision, which is really mutilation. ³ We are the circumcision. We are the ones who serve by God's Spirit and who boast in Christ Jesus. We don't put our confidence in rituals performed on the body, ⁴ though I have good reason to have this kind of confidence. If anyone else has reason to put their confidence in physical advantages, I have even more:

⁵ I was circumcised on the eighth day.

I am from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin.

I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews.

With respect to observing the Law, I'm a Pharisee.

⁶ With respect to devotion to the faith, I harassed the church.

With respect to righteousness under the Law, I'm blameless.

⁷ These things were my assets, but I wrote them off as a loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ But even beyond that, I consider everything a loss in comparison with the superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have lost everything for him, but what I lost I think of as sewer trash, so that I might gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him. In Christ I have a righteousness that is not my own and that does not come from the Law but rather from the faithfulness of Christ. It is the righteousness of God that is based on faith. ¹⁰ The righteousness that I have comes from knowing Christ, the power of his resurrection, and the participation in his sufferings. It includes being conformed to his death ¹¹ so that I may perhaps reach the goal of the resurrection of the dead.

Paul is even struggling in his letter to let go of his "I am better." Did you catch it, "With respect to righteousness under the Law, I'm blameless." Paul himself has gotten caught in the games of the world, that tell him to be effective, even for God, he has to compete with his

neighbor in the systems of the world. He has to beat out his peer in righteousness to be seen as a leader. Yet, he is trying to convey to the Philippians, that humble attitude, acting like Christ may be the only way to really let God's kingdom into the world and participate in God's cycle of life, death, and resurrection.

Take for example this story, I have shared with our leadership and want us to hear about community and what Christ does to help us let go of what hangs us up:

(Picture 1)

Once upon a time, two brothers who lived on adjoining farms fell into conflict. It was the first serious rift in 40 years of farming side by side, sharing machinery, and trading labor and goods as needed without a hitch. Then the long collaboration fell apart. It began with a small misunderstanding and it grew into a major difference, and finally it exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence.

(Picture 2)

One morning there was a knock on John's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's toolbox. "I'm looking for a few days work" he said. "Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here and there. Could I help you?" "Yes," said the older brother. "I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm. That's my neighbor, in fact, it's my younger brother. Last week there was a meadow between us and he took his bulldozer to the river levee and now there is a creek between us. Well, he may have done this to spite me, but I'll go him one better. See that pile of lumber curing by the barn? I want you to build me a fence -- an 8-foot fence -- so I won't need to see his place anymore. Cool him down, anyhow." The carpenter said, "I think I understand the situation. Show

me the nails and the post-hole digger and I'll be able to do a job that pleases you."

The older brother had to go to town for supplies, so he helped the carpenter get the materials ready and then he was off for the day. The carpenter worked hard all that day measuring, sawing, nailing. About sunset when the farmer returned, the carpenter had just finished his job.

The farmer's eyes opened wide, his jaw dropped. There was no fence there at all. (Picture 3) It was a bridge -- a bridge stretching from one side of the creek to the other! A fine piece of work -- handrails and all -- and the neighbor, his younger brother, was coming across, his hand outstretched. "You are quite a fellow to build this bridge after all I've said and done." The two brothers stood at each end of the bridge, and then they met in the middle, taking each other's hand.

They turned to see the carpenter hoist his toolbox on his shoulder. "No, wait! Stay a few days. I've a lot of other projects for you," said the older brother. "I'd love to stay on," the carpenter said, "but, I have many more bridges to build."

We know from Paul's letter that the people living in this Christian community have run across two problems, they like being right and some want to make sure others know who is living this life in Christ better than others. Sounds like behavior I and others in church have taken part in before. It is also something that is not new to the Christian Church.

At the turn of the second millennium there was new growth in Europe and a need for trading. At the same time the church was trying to establish itself throughout European civilization. The combination of these drives led people to cathedral building. Now this doesn't sound unusual to build churches in communities, it is what people do. Here is

what is interesting, the goal became to build the tallest cathedral. The taller your cathedral the farther away people could see your town and the more likely they were to come to your town to trade goods.

The challenge at the time is that the building supplies and engineering knowledge of the day had limitations. The taller you built the more unstable your structure became. It is why many cathedrals of those days were built with flying buttresses. (Picture 4) This is Notre Dame in Paris, (Picture 5). These flying buttresses, these external structures were designed to offset weight and allow for taller and taller buildings.¹

Except even then people build taller than they should, and the desire to be better to have the taller cathedral resulted in the churches literally falling down on the people inside of them and crushing them.

When we work to be better, and to outdo one another we create very precarious situations. For us personally we build cathedrals of ego, self-centered realities that when we fall from them can hurt other people with our shame. Everything that Jesus teaches, and the wisdom we find from teachers today remind us that it is by using our strengths to build and trusting God to bring others to help us build that we will build what is necessary, not the grandest structure always, but the things that will glorify God for the time and place we are in.

Paul in Philippians 2 points to how to live this way:

Imitate Christ

2 Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any sympathy, **2** complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other. **3** Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but

¹<https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiGzt6X367gAhVTyYMKHVg5CG4QjRx6BAgBEAU&url=https%3A%2F%2Farchitect.com%2Fnews%2Farticle%2F150030771%2Fnotre-dame-de-paris-asks-for-a-makeover&psig=AOvVaw0QQamn6Ok0XQoBYqPkoaUL&ust=1549804840041798>

with humility think of others as better than yourselves. **4** Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. **5** Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus:

6 Though he was in the form of God,

he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.

7 But he emptied himself

by taking the form of a slave

and by becoming like human beings.

When he found himself in the form of a human,

8 he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

In our day in age this does not mean all of us are building huge egos, trying to be at the top of ladders of success, some of us are and we are going to have to give our “I am better,” but others of us are being fed ego problems like the need to look a certain way, or achieve certain things in live, and again like last week even to buy the right things. We are going to have to give up on being the “I am better” than you that we are being fed, we have to let go and seek what God wants for our health and well-being to find a way to live in community.

We will even have to give up our addiction in our culture in shaming others that don't behave a certain way. Instead we need to convince the people in our lives, even the ones who wrong us, that children of God is who we all are, and then invite them live the best selves that God is calling them too. The only way we can do this without being called hypocrites is to try this ourselves.

In Luke 18, Jesus tells the story of the Pharisee and a Tax collector who go to pray in the temple. The tax collector is the one who is told he is not good enough by his culture, and in fact is told he should steal to be a better tax collector, taking more than the share Caesar needs. The Pharisee is supposedly the best of the best in this case. The Pharisee

prays by showing off, and praying loudly and thanking God he is not a tax collector. The tax collector humbly prays in the back of the sanctuary.

To build the bridge, to admit we are not better, to form the Christian community that Jesus points us to, the parable should have sounded like this. A tax collector prayed quietly in the back and in walked a Pharisee, a God fearing person. The Pharisee went and took the tax collector by the arm, led him forward and said, "You are a child of God, pray up front here with me. Know God can transform your life, as he daily does for me."

Friends this week, I invite us to stop trying to be better than everyone else, but instead to seek God's call in our lives. If we keep trying to be more right and better we will build cathedrals of ego that will surely topple onto us and others. Instead, let us work together to build bridges that connect us, and admit sometimes we get it wrong.

As we wrap up this week I am going to end again with prayer, during that time I invite you to write your "I am better" statement on a popsicle stick. "I am better than my neighbor." "I am better than the person I think is wrong." "I am better than the one who has hurt me." Whoever, you imagine you are better than it is time to let go of that sense of being better, and instead recognize the God given divinity in us all.

Please pray with me:

God sometimes to survive in this world, we have to know we are better than others. However, this gets in the way of us seeing your path for us, to seeing where we might build something that glorifies your loving kingdom in the world. Help us let go of those parts of our ego that get in the way, and trust that you will help us die to the parts of ourselves that keep us from living Grace. God we ask this in your holy name.

Amen