

## **The Other Fellow First**

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers  
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, in Albuquerque,  
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Philippians 2:1-13

When I was in junior high and high school, I had the privilege of going to summer camp in Upstate New York. I attended Camp Dudley, on the shores of Lake Champlain, just east of the Adirondack Mountains. Founded in 1885, by Sumner Dudley and the Young Men's Christian Association, it is the oldest continually running boys camp in the United States.

Summers at Camp Dudley meant swimming, canoeing, and sailing in the lake; hiking and camping in the mountains; playing baseball, basketball, and soccer; putting on skits and plays in the camp's theater and playing saxophone in the camp's jazz band "The Rhythm Ramblers." Every morning at breakfast we would greet the day by singing a hymn in full voice. On Sunday mornings we attended an ecumenical chapel service at an outdoor amphitheater carved into a hillside in the woods, and on Sunday evenings we joined together in a boisterous hymn sing. Camp Dudley helped to form me, first as a camper and later as a camp counselor, into the person I am today.

While it is now independent of the YMCA, it still draws from the Y's own tenets of mind, body, and spirit, and incorporates Christian values into its teachings and programs. The camp's mission is "to develop moral, personal, physical and leadership skills in the spirit of fellowship and fun, enabling boys and [now] girls to lead lives characterized by devotion to others." The camp's motto? "The Other Fellow First."

Today's Scripture reading from Philippians brought this motto to mind, because I think it encapsulates Paul's exhortation to the Christians in Philippi: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

It's a hard thing to do, particularly in a culture where we are taught to value high-esteem, to look out for "Number One," and to compete to be the best at what we do. I would venture a guess that most of the time we are thinking of ourselves and our own interests, rather than those of others. I would go so far as to say that in the U.S. today the idea of putting "the other fellow first" has become countercultural.

Paul goes on to quote what biblical scholars believe to have been an early Christian hymn or a confession of faith, describing Christ as an obedient servant. Now, this is no surprise to us. We're Christians. We're familiar with Jesus' life and teachings. We've read the accounts in the New Testament.

But just for a moment, imagine that you knew nothing about Christianity and had never heard of Jesus Christ, and someone told you that God had become human, what might you imagine that divine person to be like? In my mind, I don't imagine that person as an obedient servant at all. Far from it! I imagine that individual being the most powerful person in the world, with all the divine power of God at his or her disposal. I imagine that person taking charge of things here on earth, scolding human beings for

our selfish ambition, greed, and disregard for others, and whipping us into shape – either persuading us or forcing us to end our wars, resolve our conflicts, redistribute the world’s resources equitably so that everyone’s basic needs are met, respect the human rights of all people, and care for the earth as if the lives of our children and grandchildren depended on it (which they do).

So, then, what a surprise it is that Christ Jesus “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.”

Jesus Christ, the human incarnation of God, turns out to be very different from what we might envision left to our own imaginations. He defied the expectations of his first-century contemporaries as well. He was not the type of Christ figure, or Messiah, that people were expecting in the early first century. They were expecting someone who would drive out the Roman occupiers, restore the Davidic monarchy, and return Israel to its rightful place among nations. Instead, Jesus came in love and humility, not “to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many,” as he says in Mark’s gospel.

Paul urges the Philippians, and in turn us, to “let the same mind be in [us] that was in Christ Jesus.” To live our lives with Christ’s mindset means humbling ourselves in service to others. It means putting others first.

Admittedly, it’s not an easy thing to do. But for many of us at least it’s a value that we strive to live up to. Unfortunately, there appear to be many other people in our country today for whom putting others first is not a value at all. Humility is not part of their working vocabulary. Humbly serving others is for losers, they might say. They are only concerned about themselves. They’re number one. They’re always asking the question “what’s in it for me?” And they are hypersensitive to anything that could be interpreted as a violation of their individual rights.

State government mandates to wear masks during the current public health crisis offer a case in point. While a majority of Americans appear to see the value of wearing masks in public to help reduce the spread of the coronavirus, a vocal minority of Americans have resisted, refusing to cooperate with mask mandates, believing them to be a violation of their individual rights. They seem to feel that they have no shared responsibility for the health and wellbeing of the larger community as a whole.

But what Jesus said to his disciples, he says to all of us: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Jesus’ words go against conventional wisdom. The conventional wisdom says that if you want to be number one, you’ve got to claw your way to the top. It doesn’t matter who you step on along the way. The end justifies the means. It’s survival of the fittest. Every man for himself.

Jesus turns this thinking on its head. “Who ever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Jesus gives us a new definition of greatness. You want to be number one? Then put everyone else first, Jesus says. You want to be the leader? Then be the servant of all. Put the other person first.

Jesus and the apostle Paul both call us to humility. "Humility," says Augustine, "is the foundation of all the other virtues." So, it's pretty important! Indeed, Augustine goes on to say that "in the soul in which this virtue [of humility] does not exist there cannot be any other virtue except in mere appearance."

The twentieth-century British nun, Monica Baldwin, said that "what makes humility so desirable is the marvelous thing it does to us; it creates in us a capacity for the closest possible intimacy with God."

That's why we humble ourselves before God every Sunday morning. We sing praises to God and then join together in a prayer of confession. We confess our sin before God, we acknowledge our human frailty, our human condition, and we ask for God's mercy, for God's forgiveness. In so doing, we open ourselves to God's presence and the possibility of intimacy with the divine.

And that's why we're here, isn't it? To grow closer to God? To strengthen our relationship with the divine?

So, then, let us cultivate humility in ourselves by serving others, for as Jesus teaches us: "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." Amen.