

# FOLLOWING JESUS FROM THE CROSS TO THE GRAVE; FROM THE GRAVE TO THE SKY

Philippians 2:1-13

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I've been reading *Empire Falls* by Richard Russo. One thing that strikes me as I read -- especially in the light of my sermon preparation -- is how often the characters *put down* one another. For example, one prominent character, a seventy-year old house painter, meets a friend of his son's whom he hasn't seen for years. "Jimmy," he says, "What a stupid kid you were growing up?" He turns to his son and says, "You remember what a stupid kid he was? It was pitiful. I don't think I can remember another child so untalented."

We Americans are good at *putting down* people. Watch a sitcom or read a book and you'll find that *putting down* people has become a way of life. *I made me think of how often I put down people in my family, work, kids, friends*  
~~I got to thinking about how often I put down people -- sometimes when I don't even realize it.~~ Do you ever put down people? Among very close friends put-downs can show affection, but often they hurt people. Why do we put down people? Maybe because we're preoccupied with our status.

~~We feel so insecure, but when we put down people we feel superior.~~

Put the shoe on the other foot and think how you feel when you've been put down. Nothing crushes our spirits like being put down. My mother once admired a friend's beautiful diamond ring. "I'd love to have a diamond like that," she said. Her friend answered, "Your husband could never afford <sup>a ring</sup> something like this." What a put down -- even though it was true. My mother felt crushed.

Now I want to relate all this to our epistle lesson. Apparently some people in Philippi were feeling like my mother after she'd been put down. <sup>& that was causing disunity</sup> Instead of being encouraged, they left church feeling discouraged. Instead of leaving consoled, they went home upset. Paul never tells us exactly what the problem was but he intimates it was discord caused by people putting down one another. Put downs lead to nasty confrontations and divisions. So Paul urges Christians to "be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." If Christians do that, we'll stop putting down one another.

The root of the divisions was very likely a disagreement between two good women in the church. In chapter 4, verse 2, Paul writes, "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to *be of the same mind*." - The very same phrase he used in the passage read this morning. Paul goes on to say, "*help these women*, for they have

struggled beside me in the work of the gospel and their names are in the book of life." So at the root of the disunity in the church was two good, hard working saints. The division wasn't between good and bad people, lazy and hard working people, or Christian and non-Christian people - but between two, good, hard working, women whose names were written in the book of life.

Paul had the heart of a pastor and was concerned for the unity of the community. Unity can't be enjoyed if we put down others. We must stop thinking only of our own interests, Paul insists. He mentions three causes of disunity. The first is "selfish ambition." Ambition can be a good thing. It's good to be hard working, enterprising and energetic - but Paul was talking about *selfish ambition that attempts to lift ourselves by putting down others*. "I am smarter than you. I am better than you. I work harder than you." The second source of disunity is what Paul calls "conceit" which is feeling good about us by putting down others. "Why can't you do this as well as I can?" The third cause of disunity is *insisting on our own interests* at the expense of others. "What's in it for me?"

Paul's answer to the put downs causing so much disunity was to hold them up to Jesus. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself." Christ didn't *put down* people. He *came down* from heaven to earth to lift people up -- not to put down people. He came from heaven to earth, from earth to the cross, from the cross to the grave. He humbled himself to save the world, so, Paul says, why can't we humble ourselves for the common good of the church? *why can't we have the mind of Christ -*

*Humility is not a matter of putting ourselves down but of lifting up people around us*  
~~Genuinely humble people don't put down others.~~ Benjamin Disraeli and William Gladstone were two of the most powerful men of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They took turns serving as Prime Minister of England when the British Empire was at its zenith. On one occasion a young woman was placed between Lord Gladstone and Lord Disraeli at a state dinner. After dinner a journalist interviewed the woman. "What was it like to dine with the two most powerful men in the world?" She answered, "When I talked to Prime Minister Gladstone I felt like he was the most intelligent man I've ever met. But," she said, "when I talked to Mr. Disraeli I felt like I was the most intelligent person in the world." Gladstone centered the conversation on himself; Disraeli centered his attention on the young woman. Humility is not a matter of putting ourselves down. It's a matter of

*encouraging, consoling*

lifting up people – lifting their spirits – something we can't do if we're centered on ourselves. Think, for a moment, how we treat others? If asked, would people say, "I feel so stupid and inadequate when I work with him." Or would they say, "I love working with her because she makes me feel like I have something valuable to offer."

God wants us to lift up people, not put them down. In 1984 former president Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalyn came to NYC for a Habitat for Humanity work mission. He came on a chartered bus from Plains, Georgia with a group of 40 people. They went to the work site and met the project coordinator. "President Carter," he said, "we have a men's dormitory and women's dormitory for our Habitat volunteers but we're not going to ask you and Mrs. Carter to stay there. We have a presidential suite for you. It's all decked out for you with your own private bathroom. We've been working on it all week. Here's your key. It's yours."

President Carter humbly thanked the director and said, "This is a great honor you've given me, and I'm grateful. But may I just say that a young couple was on the bus from Plains with Rosalyn and me. We got talking to them and found that they were recently married. They used some of their honeymoon money for this Habitat mission, to build homes for poor people. Would you please allow me to let this wonderful, young couple turn the presidential suite into a honeymoon suite." And everybody cheered. President Carter set aside the prerogatives of the office. As former President of the US he has a right to the place, you might say. But he set that right aside (*Tom Tewell, What's the Hardest Instrument to play in the Orchestra*).

Paul wrote, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but" humbled himself – and by doing so lifted up all of us.

God of all, you gave your only-begotten Son to take the form of a servant, and to be obedient even to death on a cross. Give us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, that, sharing in his humility, we may come to be with him in his glory, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.