

**(LOVE) LETTERS FOR LENT:
RESIGNATION, RECOMMENDATION AND REFERENCE
March 17, 2024
Philippians 2: 5-11**

Our text is from Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul founded the Church there. It was one with which he shared a special relationship. He had a deep affection for this congregation. He writes as their pastor. He challenges them to be who Christ calls them to be. He's not just concerned with their life as individuals but also with their life as a community. It's likely that Paul is quoting one of the hymns of the early church. The words describe Jesus, who he is and what he did.

"Who though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross."

Paul says that Jesus "*emptied himself*". The Greek word is "*kenosis*". It's a "*pouring out*" of oneself. This is Paul's understanding of what it means to say Jesus is "*the Word made flesh*". It's his understanding of "*Incarnation*". We see it in Bethlehem. We see it at Calvary. God descends to be with us. God takes our human form fully. The Greek word for "form" is literal, meaning being, not the word for taking the appearance of. Creation's Lord becomes creation's servant. In Jesus God makes himself vulnerable for us and to us. It's done as a gift of love.

Paul also says Jesus "*humbled himself*". Paul does to—reminding them that they aren't following him, but Christ always. Jesus was clear about his identity and his mission. He didn't claim any divine prerogative or privilege. He didn't lift himself up by putting others down. Humility is a difficult virtue. It's not a popular commodity in our competitive, reward-seeking, "*me-first*" society. Think of the things we value. Status. Success. Power.

Money. Image. Contrast those desires with this humble figure riding on a donkey.

Paul's words here tell us something about who Jesus is. **They also tell us something about what it means to follow him.**

Paul writes to the Philippians, "*Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus*". "Mind" here is better understood as a way of thinking that determines action. It's the frame of reference we use to make our decisions both as individuals and as a community. To have the "*mind of Christ*" is to be mindful of God's presence in the world. It's to be mindful of how we're living and what guides our choices. It's to be mindful of the needs, pain and suffering of others.

Each week at First our sung response to the benediction is our old vision statement. "We are a Church, whose people seek, to know Christ, serve Christ, share Christ". It's another way of saying that "like-mind". It's a great vision. It's also often hard to actually do. We want others to see the love, compassion, concern, welcome and hospitality of Jesus reflected in this congregation. In what we say and what we do, we want others to see that we do follow him. We want them to meet him in how we live and act, both in the world and with one another.

It's not easy to be Jesus' follower in our world. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor in Germany executed for his resistance to the Nazi regime insisted that the call to the Christian life is to "**come and die**". In our communion liturgy Pastor Jon always says "come and dine, come and dine."

Come and die. Who wants to do that? Even if we take those words metaphorically, they call for hard choices. I know there are things in my life that I need to surrender—I need to set aside—I need to let "*die*" if I am to follow Jesus and have the life he wants to give me. I know there are things to which I cling too tightly. I know there are ideas, deeply held notions and positions that need

to change. I know there are choices I make that take me further away rather than nearer to God's kingdom. Isn't it that way for you also? Are we willing to let such things "**die**"?

It was at a pee-wee baseball game. When the young boy got up to the plate he looked over to the coach for direction. The coach gave him the signal to sacrifice bunt. He then promptly proceeded to take three big swings at the ball and strike out. The coach came up to him frowning. He said, "Didn't you see me give you the signal to sacrifice"? "Yes", replied the boy. He explained, "But I didn't really think that you meant it".

Too often that's what we say to God. "Yes, God, I heard that talk about sacrifice and service. I didn't really think that you meant it."

To have the mind of Jesus is to be intent on doing God's will. How intent are we? How much do we really want to follow Jesus? How much of him do we want in our lives? Before we answer, we could check our schedules. Is there time set aside for God in them? How and where are we building our relationship with him? We could look at our wallets. How are we using our gifts to build God's kingdom and do God's work in the world? We could examine our priorities. How are they shaped by "*the mind of Christ*"? How do they show others we "*know Christ*"?

You may have heard of Clarence Jordan. He's the founder of the Koinonia Farms. The community was begun in the days when the civil rights movement in the South was most turbulent. The Koinonia community was an open community. All people of any race or station were invited to take part in its cooperative farming project. For that reason it was often under attack and constantly in court.

Clarence asked his brother, Robert, an attorney who later became a state senator in Georgia and a Justice of the Georgia Supreme Court if he'd defend the community. Robert said, "I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. If I represented you, I'd lose my job. I'd lose my home. I might lose everything." Clarence said to him, "We might lose everything, too, you know."

Robert replied, "That's different." "Why is it different?" asked Clarence. "You and I joined the Church on the same Sunday when we were boys and I expect that when we came forward the preacher asked you the same question he asked me. He asked me, 'Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?' I answered 'Yes'. What did you say?"

Robert said, "Well, I follow Jesus up to a point".

Clarence asked, "Could that point by any chance be the cross?"

Robert said, "That's right. I follow him to the cross, but not up on it. I'm not going to get myself crucified."

Then Clarence responded. I'm sure he loved his brother when he said what he did. They were hard words. He said to him. "Well then, I don't believe that you're really a disciple. You're an admirer of Jesus, not a disciple."

You may remember the name of Eric Liddell. He was called the "Flying Scotsman" and was an Olympic running champion. His story is told in the movie, Chariots of Fire.

If you saw that movie you know how he refused to race on Sunday because he was a Christian. He wouldn't give in to the pressure put upon him. He withdrew from the 100 meters race, his best event. His decision was made well before the Games began and he spent the intervening months training for the 400 meters. It was an event in which he'd previously excelled. As Liddell went to the starting blocks, an American coach slipped a piece of paper in his hand. It had a quotation from 1 Samuel 2:30, "Those who honor me I will honor." Liddell ran with that paper in his hand. He won the race. He broke the existing world record with a time of 47.6

What's less known about Liddell is, as they say, "the rest of the story". He was the son of missionary parents in China. He returned there to work with them. He began teaching and in 1932 was ordained as a pastor. He married and became a father.

Liddell sent his family to Canada when the war began. In 1943, he was interned by the Japanese in a prison camp. He

became a leader there and helped organize the camp. He also helped the elderly, taught Bible classes, arranged games and taught the children science. He was known to them as "Uncle Eric".

Friends who knew him wrote, "He seemed to get his strength and self-discipline and his air of quiet serenity from his early morning sessions of prayer, meditation and Bible study. He would come from those times and stride through the rest of the day as though the Sermon on the Mount were still ringing in his ears. Whatever he received in those early morning devotions, he spent the rest of the day giving to others."

Winston Churchill approved a prisoner exchange and Liddell, as a famous athlete, was one of those chosen to go. He didn't. Instead he gave his place to a pregnant woman.

In his last letter to his wife, written on the day he died, he tells of having a nervous breakdown in the camp due to overwork. He was actually suffering from an inoperable brain tumor. He died on February 21, 1945, five months before liberation. He was interred in the Mausoleum of Martyrs in China, a great honor for a non-Chinese person. He was greatly mourned throughout the world.

One of his friends summed up his life saying, "He wasn't a great leader, or an inspired thinker, but he knew what he ought to do and he did it."

Eric Liddell had the mind-set of Jesus. He knew to whom his life belonged. Above the cheers of the crowd he listened to the voice of God. In obedience and surrender he gave himself and his life in loving service to others.

Are we expected, to "come and die?" What kind of love letters are we writing? Are they blank pages? Are they introductions to Jesus? Are they urging people to follow him?

Most of us will not be expected to give our lives FOR GOD. But to turn over your life; surrender to love, grace and power. To give your life TO GOD; well that's a pretty good start.