

Building Community through servanthood

Philippians 2:1-13

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If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 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. 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,

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.

Therefore God also highly exalted him

and gave him the name

that is above every name,

so that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue should confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Introduction

Many of us are global nomads. We move to a different country, to another mega-city, to a new home every few years; each time, we adapt to new cultures, new friends, new colleagues in work.

We continually live in an environment of losing the homes we like, and the friends we like. And we live far away from the natural communities we were born in, our families, the friends of our youth.

The last time I had a home in Holland, that house was 10 minutes away from the home of my parents. A brother and a sister of mine live in a radius of less than 3 kilometers from that home where we grew up. Most of my in-laws also live in that same area.

Living at a large distance from our families and friends, can be hurting at times. For others, being away from their natural community is actually why they like the nomad life.

We are strong people, used to sort out our own problems by ourselves, but it is very easy in such a lifestyle to feel deeply lonely at times because we are born as social beings, as people who are made for being in community with others.

We are defined, we are who we are, by the community we are part of. Our family, our friends, our work, our church.

My experience is that in order to lessen the impact of being uprooted again and again, many of us have a tendency to

maintain some internal distance from the people and the *temporary* communities we are part of.

In order to avoid the pain from being uprooted every few years, we develop a mechanism of only allowing ourselves very shallow roots. We often have very nice, very sweet, very happy relationships, but often also incredibly shallow.

We do not give ourselves too intensely to people, because we know that we'll be saying farewell again in a few years time. And being uprooted is painful, if the roots go deep and wide.

I like to suggest that it is better for us to allow that pain, as the avoidance of the pain is at the expense of also enjoying true community and its great blessings.

Better deeper pain and deeper joy, than the grey monotony of a mediocre social life. The choice for mediocre relationships actually increases loneliness, alienation, it does not solve it.

Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher who lived in the last century, has some beautiful things to say about our need for community:

All life emerges out of community and strives for community; Community is the well spring, the source of life. Therefore, the individual can overcome alienation and actualize his unique potential only in the context of genuine community. [quoted in Laurence J. Silberstein, *Martin Buber's Social and Religious Thought* (New York, 1990), p. 37]

For lonely nomads, it is great to be part of a church community like St John's; but if we want our church to be a real community, we must also be prepared to do some hard work.

St Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, a mega-city, actually a harbor, in the Roman Empire, because he wanted them to work hard to strengthen their community-life. If you think of it, such church in a mega-city also consisted of many global nomads – sailors, many Jews whose roots were elsewhere, people moving around for finding work, geographically and socially mobile people.

1. Jesus Christ: nature of man

In order to show the church in Philippi how to strengthen their community life, St Paul urges them to have the same mind as Christ Jesus. If we have the mind of Christ, Paul says, our community will be stronger.

In general terms, this is very true; if we all focus on the center, the heart of our community, Jesus Christ, we automatically also grow closer to one other. If you like closer ties with one another, a starting point is for all of us, to draw closer to Him.

But St Paul wants us to focus on a specific aspect of Jesus Christ – and he does this in a creative manner; he quotes from a song. Paul probably wrote this letter in the year 61. The song he quotes was already known in the churches, so it was written not later than 20 or 30 years after Jesus lived in Israel.

If what the churches in the Roman Empire were singing was complete nonsense, the churches and their message would be laughed away. No-one would join the bandwagon of the church.

I think part of the strength of the message of that early church, was that it could be verified. There was much contact between the Jewish communities all over the Empire and Israel, and if the stories told about Jesus were simply untrue, the church would not have stood a chance against the criticism of Judaism and paganism.

What could people verify? Well, to begin with, *the humanity and real death of Jesus*. The church was singing about the real humanity of Jesus: why was this important?

Soon after the Christian faith began to spread, some Christians with a neo-Platonic background began to teach that the divine Jesus was *not a real human being and that He did not have a real body. Hence, He also did not die a real death*.

For those Christians whose worldviews were first molded by their Greek philosophy and only secondarily by the Gospel, the idea that God could reveal himself in truly physical, tangible, human form was unthinkable; they thought that *matter* was evil, and they equated goodness, and God, with the pure Idea, the absolutely spiritual. Anything physical was per definition distant from God, even against God.

But the churches underlined their faith: Jesus was deeply rooted in human society, in the Jewish community. He was exactly like all human beings, with the appearance and nature as any Jewish man. And He died physically and in great agony.

And if you had difficulty believing this, go and verify, was the message of the early church. Thousands of people in Israel had seen him, touched him, spoken with him, they saw him eat and drink, and they saw him die on the cross.

‘This is my body’, Jesus said before He was crucified while eating with his friends. ‘This is my blood’. The church has since then celebrated the physicality of Jesus.

2. Jesus Christ: nature of God

The song of the churches also claimed that He was God. A highly amazing claim of course. The early Christians were willing to face ridicule, imprisonments, suffering, yes death, because they were not willing to give up on this claim. For this reason, Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter.

The early church must have been deeply convinced of what it proclaimed. That claim was either true and worth dying for, or it was utterly ludicrous.

The same people who saw and heard Jesus in Israel could confirm his miracles and that they heard him speak about his divinity. They could attest to the fact that he had an authority that was beyond what was humanly possible.

He was in nature God, enjoying eternal bliss in the perfect social community of the Holy Trinity. God needed nothing, and enjoyed a communion within Himself that was absolutely perfect. When this God created the world, He made man in his image, as a social communal being.

And for the sake of mankind, someone inside that eternal and glorious community of God was prepared to become a human being.

Though He was by nature God, He did not consider equality with God as something He had to hold onto.

He emptied himself of his heavenly glory and became a lowly human being. This was a painful choice, being uprooted from heavenly glory, and entering into the community of mankind, where Jesus humbly accepted the role of a servant.

This incarnation is the heart of what we celebrate in church. It is also a deep lesson for us all. Jesus was, if you like, an expat, coming from afar. But He also truly embraced the community He came to live in, even though He knew that his time there would be limited and that participating in that community would have its painful aspects.

As a real human being, Jesus is therefore aware of what is going on in our nomadic hearts, what keeps our minds and feelings occupied. He knows the loneliness.

Now Paul used this song to illustrate what he told the church in the previous verses, before the song. In order to strengthen the community, he wrote, have the mind of Christ Jesus:

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.

We live in a society dominated by rights-activism, permeated with the philosophy of "me first". Demanding one's rights and privileges is popular, even necessary in some cases, but it is not a great building block for community.

Community life is impossible if our focus is in the first place on what we can get out of the group. It can only bud and flourish, if we wonder: what can I do for others; how can I help others; where can I serve. What may I add to the life of the community?

In order to encourage the congregation to such behavior, in Philippi, but just as much here in Maadi, we are reminded by Paul of the mind of Jesus, that is, his humility and servanthood.

The deeply religious belief in Christ as fully God who also became fully man, leads us to ask the very mundane question: what can I do for you, my brother. How can I help you, my sister.

Martin Buber says it beautifully. If we want to build community with each other:

A person cannot be a means for the other, in order to achieve his goal, but must be present for him as a living being... as a being for whom I am there even as he is for me... [quoted in Laurence J. Silberstein, *Martin Buber's Social and Religious Thought* (New York, 1990), p. 179]

Community cannot be build if we are not prepared to really allow our roots to go deep, to the level of the heart and mind of the others here.

Yes, that is painful, as it makes us very vulnerable. And we feel additional pain when we have to pack our suitcases again. It is painful to extract our roots again, if they are deep in the soil of mutual relationships.

But it is in line with how God formed us, as social beings; by rooting deeply in community, we not only strengthen the communal life of us all, but in a very real sense, we also find our true selves.

3. Through mud to glory

Jesus went through the mud for us, and by doing so, He not only created us into a community, but He also gained renewed access to the eternal glory of God.

Jesus RE-gained the eternal glory He had left previously for our sake. By serving the community He found himself again, if you like. Jesus prayed shortly before his death:

Now Father, glorify me with that glory I had with you before ever the world existed.

It was exactly Jesus Christ's humble servanthood that made His heavenly Father exalt him back into the glory of the communion of the Trinity - to the highest place, and to make Him gain a name above every name.

Jews steeped in their Holy Books considered this song of the churches blasphemous. In Judaism, the name above every name was the name of JHWH: *I am who I am*. The ultimate name of God that could not be pronounced for fear of desecrating God.

The Jews were so afraid to pronounce the name that when they came across this name in their Scriptures, they pronounced it not as JHWH, but as Adonai, meaning Lord.

The Greek Septuagint translation of those Jewish Scriptures replaced JHWH in accordance with this Jewish habit with the Greek word *Kurios*, also meaning Lord.

Everyone shall confess that Jesus is *Kurios*, the ancient Christian song says. The church equated Him with the eternal God.

That was also underlined by the fact that in the song, a verse was quoted from Isaiah 45:23. In the Old Testament, JHWH says:

Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear.

In the Christian hymn of the early church, these words are applied to Jesus Christ.

The second person in the Holy Trinity was prepared to become a human being and suffer death; He gave up on his own personal desires, his individual rights, in order to serve us. He existed for the other in the first place.

And because Jesus was prepared to serve, God elevated him back into his former glory as JHWH, *Kurios*, Lord. What an amazing confession of the early church.

What an amazing promise to us. We are called to serve one another, in accordance with the example of Jesus Christ, and we may also expect God to bless our lives in this new community.

To act in a manner of humility to one another, serving one another, going through the mud for one another, that will ensure great communal life in our congregation.

So let us grow our social roots deep, and offer ourselves to one another. What can I do for you.

In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, our example.

Amen.