

On Ascension Sunday, the last few verses of our text are truly appropriate:

therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that every knee should bow at the name of Jesus. Ascension Day is the fortieth day after Easter, and always on a Thursday, and the Sunday after is Ascension Sunday. Another way to remember, it's the Sunday before Pentecost, and that's next week. So, today we celebrate that occasion when Jesus was lifted up into the heavens. But what is the Apostle Paul really getting at when he writes Jesus is exalted beyond anyone else (verse 9)? We have to understand Jesus didn't simply stroll up to the pearly gates and demand entry on the basis of his personality or his divine nobility. Alone, of all the people who ever lived on this earth, he was the one who had to earn his way into glory: he humbled himself and became obedient, even to death (verse 8). For everybody else, we must acknowledge that our relationship to God, and our salvation, rests only upon God's grace, God's "unwarranted favor" *for us*. So, as we work our way backwards in our reading, we find Jesus the universally confessed and worshipped Lord of all because he became the servant of all (verse 7) and suffered death- that's why he must be exalted- and this a full reversal of his eternal life as Son of God and Prince of heaven. Here

then, the complete cycle of Jesus' biography, which the Apostle recounts to us as motivation to humility and service to brothers and sisters: have this same mind among yourselves (verse 5). This is what we are about as Christians in this world; faith, and God's mercy do not elevate us to instant glorification, but rather compel us- just like our Lord- to take the form of a servant for the sake of others, that we might display the truth about Jesus in our living, and so that every tongue might confess Jesus is Lord, and give glory to God the Father (verse 11).

Our scripture is the famous Christ Hymn, it is sometimes called. Scholars believe it was an actual hymn sung by the early church and appropriated by Paul, that describes succinctly his doctrine of Christ- even if verses 6-7 are complex, and difficult to translate. What does the "form of God" mean, what does "equality with God" mean? If Jesus Christ is the eternal second person of the Trinity, then he is absolutely God, always and everywhere: but he gave up his divinity- "Emptied" himself? This is a disconcerting concept in theological circles, because if Jesus became "not God" for a while, then the doctrine of the Trinity falls apart. Even the great minds cannot explain how Jesus could let go of his divinity, or certain parts of it- like perfect knowledge and absolute power- so that he might be fully human;

how he could live life as a real man and become a suffering servant, and still be God. So, our theologies are incomplete. Even if they sound hopeful and inspiring.

So we don't have it figured out, the story of Jesus; we don't even understand our own stories. All too often we forget where we came from and where we are going, and sometimes forget what we are supposed to be about right now; you know, the servant part, the humility part- the willingness to let go of our sense of privilege, our "inherited benefits" as God's children: letting go, so that we can be true friends among the people of the world, and not consider ourselves above it all.

And perhaps we aren't required to comprehend exactly the meaning of "kenotic theology," that's the idea of Jesus "emptying himself" I noted earlier, because there is already someone you know very well who has patterned this lifestyle for you. It is another person whose name you are happy to exalt, and especially on this day: your mother. Our mothers, to be honest about them, were just people, with their struggles and biases and foibles, but in their relationships with us- in your relationship with your mother- she was the one who "emptied" herself to become everything *for you*, she was your servant. Think of the times she heard you in the night and got up to feed you, or sat up and rocked you back to sleep; and when you were older, the times she listened and cried with you; who

worked so hard- around the house, or took on a second job; how often did you get the last bite or the extra helping, and she got less? That's what selfless love does.

Yes, Mom is the great example for all of us of Jesus letting go of his divine right, so that all the world might come into relationship with the true God of love and mercy. The mothers of every nation and every religion show us the real meaning of religious faith: kindness, humility, and service for the sake of others.

Many have written that Philippians is Paul's most felicitous and encouraging letter; that this church, the first church in Europe, presented the fewest problems. And so his most constant instruction to the people there was just this: rejoice and be thankful. It is a word for us, too, a powerful and meaningful word for every church, even where there are hurt feelings and discouragement: rejoice and be thankful. Behind this pleasant command is the admonition to let go all the petty, self-involved things, all the "righteous" causes that drive persons apart. Let go. Mom did: don't you think she deserved anything she ever could have taken for herself? But she didn't- she let all that go, believed it would make you happier to have it. And Jesus gave up everything he possessed and deserved. All the universe was his, but he let it go, so that he might share it all with us.

You may have heard the story from this past week, about the tow-truck driver who answered a call, but then immediately drove off and left the woman stranded when he saw a political sticker on her bumper he didn't like. A woman with her handicap tag hanging from the mirror. He even felt comfortable saying that God told him it was the right thing to do.

We may think we have a pretty good handle on the meaning of scripture and a good understanding of what Christian faith is- as children we were taught morality and brought up as nice boys and girls; we listened and obeyed Mom. But this scripture shows us something more, and if we believe it, proves to us that God is finding ways to reach people and save them: Jesus Christ emptied himself and took on the form of a servant. This isn't God starting up another religion and adding more rules to all the old ones, so that God has reasons to condemn and punish. No, this is Jesus with a lifeline, coming to tow us back to a safe place. And verses 10-11, knee-bowing and tongue-confessing are not threats to those who do not know Jesus, but are terms of gratitude and worship to the God who has come *for us*; it is recognition of what Jesus has done, and thankfulness for such profound love. And so, it's not up to us, either, to condemn and judge, but rather to give ourselves to the deeper morality of service to others.

And to have this same mindset as Jesus our Lord, to do nothing out of selfishness or ego (verse 3), and to look after “the interests of others” (verse 4), instead of finding ways to tear them down. Shouldn’t it be a question we ask ourselves at least every so often, what can we do? to reach those persons around us, to convince them of God’s love for them? It may mean that sometimes we must change our attitudes, and become to “those other people” like we are to our friends- like our mothers were with us, like God always is with us.

We are not the ones who have come down from heaven, nor have we ascended up to heaven, we can’t save, no one is bowing down to us; we are still here. But we can show our neighbors that perfect and selfless life- by the way we live our lives and by the words we speak; and by our humility, we can demonstrate a truly kind and honest life that has Lord Jesus in it. To the glory of God.