

## “Philippians 2:13”

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Philippians 2:5-13

<sup>5</sup> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, <sup>8</sup> taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, <sup>8</sup> he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. <sup>9</sup> Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

<sup>12</sup> 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; <sup>13</sup> for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Mark 8:34-38

<sup>34</sup> He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. <sup>36</sup> For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup> Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup> Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

During the 2008 UM General Conference, our membership vows were edited. Until that time, new members had promised “faithfully to participate in the ministries of the church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.” Starting in January ‘09, this sentence was changed to include the word, witness. Witness is our theme today. Merriam-Webster dictionary gives a few definitions for the word. A witness gives evidence, in court for example. A witness watches and verifies that you used your own signature on a document. Witness can also be a person’s testimony that something happened, our public affirmation by what we say or do. Witnesses observe or experience an event or a person. They testify to what they saw and heard. Sometimes, besides telling what they know they live out what they learned.

Christians are witnesses to the life and ministry of Jesus the Christ. Through our lives, we witness that God loves all of creation enough to send Jesus so that we might accept how vast God’s caring is.

Jesus was an ordinary person in a lot of ways. His mother got pregnant; nine months later, she gave birth. Friends may have given gifts. Strangers certainly did. When trouble came, his family had to flee and live as refugees the same way people do today. Jesus’ parents made sure he had a good religious upbringing, to the point that as a youth he disappeared into the temple for a few days and when his parents finally tracked him down, he said, “Where else would I be?” which sounds to me like he was a rather typical twelve-year-old.

This boy grew and learned a trade. Through him, God took up carpentry and lived among us.

Eventually though, Jesus set aside his chisel and the adz. He was baptized in the Jordan River, and after forty days in preparing the wilderness, he began to travel throughout Galilee, teaching and preaching to whomever would listen, feeding, healing, and announcing that God's kingdom was a present reality.

Jesus befriended the outcast, the foreigner, the contagious, the mentally ill, tax collectors, prostitutes and fisherman – most of whom the religious establishment of the day, and people in general, conscientiously avoided. And Jesus was popular. He accepted everyone as they were – though he did admonish them to “sin no more” – and he loved them as he worked to help them believe that God also loved them.

In the end, this got him into trouble. Those religious leaders put it to the Roman occupying government that something had to be done. And they succeeded in having him killed, a slow and excruciatingly painful death.

But God is irrepressible. Uncontainable and undefeatable. Three days after his execution, Christ Jesus emerged from the borrowed tomb in which he'd been laid. He appeared first to those closest to him, then to others.

At first, they didn't know what to make of this surprising development, even though they had been told to expect it. Little by little, they came to realize that they had witnessed something beyond human understanding and that they must share it.

If you are one who has trouble coming to terms with the resurrection event, UCC Bishop Spong expresses it this way: The disciples knew they had been part of something amazing through the life, ministry and crucifixion of Jesus. They knew this was God-in-Action – beyond anything anyone had ever known. They knew Christ was still with them, real and present. The crucifixion story, Spong suggests, came out of their efforts to try to put these truths into words.

However you experience the resurrection, Christ lives in each of us today. And it is to him that we are called to be witnesses. In what ways are we to witness to Christ? Would you turn to page 34 in your blue hymnal and follow along with me?

We profess our faith each time we witness a baptism, a confirmation, a reaffirmation of baptism or welcome new members into the church. If you'll follow the questions along with me...

We witness to Christ each time we renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of our sin. We witness to Christ whenever we accept the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. We witness to Christ when we confess him as our savior, put our whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as our Lord, together with all persons within God's Church. And we witness to Christ when we live our lives as faithful members of God's Church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world.

Within the Church, we call this witnessing discipleship. Unlike certain evangelical types who see Christianity as a once-for-all faith statement, within the UMC (and other mainline churches) we recognize that discipleship is a life journey. Through this Lenten season, we have examined aspects of this journey, reminding ourselves of what God expects of us.

With Jesus' other listeners we heard: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your mind, and with all your strength. [And] You will love your neighbor as yourself.” We were reminded that love costs and that God's love is a good strainer through which to examine our actions and ideas. The next week, we were reminded that as much as we're called to love we are also called to depend on God – again, with every fiber of our being. We're not supposed to count on our jobs or money or families or even ourselves. What radical ideas! And each week of Lent, we have been invited to fill out connection cards, committing to

practices that will help us grow in our discipleship – through acts of piety and acts of mercy. These faith formation opportunities are the reason we stayed with the cards, even while some of you chose not to use them.

These last two weeks, we've talked about God's expectation that we will help others simply because there is need – through small kindnesses and through dismantling systems that leave people in poverty or oppression. We talked about being lively offerings – opening ourselves to God's path for us and allowing God, daily, to transform us from the inside out.

Since many of you committed to come to all the Lenten Sunday services, this might be like a walk down memory lane. And if you're doing all these things we talked about in the last month, then you're certainly ready for today's lesson. We read together that Jesus "emptied himself ... humbled himself and became obedient."

I'm not going to say that you should empty and humble yourself or become obedient. Does that surprise you? Instead I'm going to point to the title of today's sermon – Philippians 2:13. Maybe I'd better read the verse: "God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out [God's] good purposes." A better translation might be, "God is the one working in you – both the willing and the working."

Jesus says, "All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me." We might think he means that we're supposed to do this under our own power. We might throw our hands in the air and give up. It's never happening.

Yet Jesus was fully human – as the ancient creed says - as well as fully divine. And he did take up his cross. He followed God as completely as ever a person followed. He did not do it himself though. He trusted God. He connected with God. He gave himself again and again to God, whatever God wanted of him. And he became obedient and humble and emptied himself *because* that was God's good purpose.

Jesus was able to do all that he did precisely because God both enabled him to want it and empowered him to do it. God does this with all of us.

Not long ago, a news show ran a story about the White Helmets, a corps of volunteers in Aleppo in war-torn Syrian. As attackers would bomb neighborhoods, the White Helmets would rush in – sometimes before the bombing stopped – digging, with bare hands if necessary, to free survivors from the rubble. The bombers knew about them, and would sometime blast the same sites right away again hoping to eliminate the White Helmets.

As you think of witness, picture those White Helmets with their dust-covered faces and bleeding fingernails. It is these people and thousands... millions... and us whenever we go the distance who reveal the world God intends for us all to create.

We live as witnesses to Christ Jesus when we devote ourselves to living our baptismal promises. As congregations, we promise to do all in our power to equip each other to live as Christ's representatives in the world. For over nine years, our promise has also included, "faithfully to participate in the ministries of the church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness..."

May it be so. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to my friend Steven W. Manskar, until lately of UM Discipleship Ministries, for his sermon starter, "To Witness to Jesus Christ in the World," [umcdiscipleship.org/resources/to-witness-to-jesus-christ-in-the-world](http://umcdiscipleship.org/resources/to-witness-to-jesus-christ-in-the-world). Last viewed March 19, 2018.