

“BEND THE KNEE”

Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost; September 27, 2020

It’s soccer season. Okay, yes, it’s also football season — which is good, I guess. And so for parents with kids playing, this is the season of “long socks.” Perhaps you’re thinking that a sermon with the title “Bend the Knee” would be about sports, don’t you?

Soccer socks are knee-high, incredibly tight, and really, really hard to pull up on a squirmy 3rd grader. Of course, they need to be washed



after every use. But soccer is a good team sport for young children. The typical child’s career starts around age 4 and continues through high school. The 4 year-olds

probably spend more time kicking dandelions and running away from bees than they do kicking the ball and running to offer support to their teammates. And yet soccer at whatever level teaches kids to work together, to be a “team.”

One of the team courtesies that soccer still expects of its players is the requirement to “take a knee.” When some player on the field is

injured, you “take a knee.” When the referee blows the whistle and commands all players on the field to stand down because someone is hurt, every player stops in their tracks and drops to one knee on the grass. It’s a position of respect and concern for a colleague who needs help. They stay in that position until the referee again blows a whistle, letting the players know that the injured player is cared for and everybody else can now resume their game.

It’s a good lesson to learn. “Taking a knee” because someone else is in need; “taking a knee” because concern for another player is more important at that moment than winning the game. Unfortunately, “taking a knee” is something that can be divisive. Breathe easy because I have no desire for us to go down that particular path.

Millennials and other young people who are fans of HBO’s popular show *Game of Thrones* can tell you about the point in the series when one primary question centered around this intrigue: Would Winterfell’s Jon Snow “bend the knee” to the Dragon Queen? In other words, would the eternal struggle for more



power, more influence, more land, more respect and honor, finally force the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch to acquiesce and "take a knee" — a sign of fealty to another, the Queen of Meereen — in order to take advantage of what the Mother of Dragons might be able to offer them in return?

Game of Thrones is based on an adolescent series of novels. The storyline is set in mythical kingdoms that supposedly existed hundreds of years ago. It's just a good story and has no direct application to 21st century life. Except for one fact. Each and every one of us is confronted on a daily basis with that same question: "For whom will you bend the knee?"

Christian hermits in the west disappeared sometime between the 16th and the 19th century, the very time hermits were making their appearance in gardens across Europe. In the 17th and 18th centuries



aristocratic gardens in Europe would signify their importance by employing a hermit to do nothing but live in a hut or cave and walk the estate and the garden. These hermits were

purely ornamental, and they had no function other than to be seen in the garden looking hermit-like and live in a hermitage. Some would-be hermit signed-up for a period of years, some as long as 7 years, and for services-rendered, he got free room and board. A hermit would negotiate how long he would let hair and fingernails grow, and how many times a day he would show yourself. The journey from the ornamental garden hermit to the garden ornaments of gnomes is a direct one.

A journalist named Michael Finkel wrote a best-selling story of what he calls *The Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit* (2017). At the age of 20, Christopher Knight decided to live in the Maine woods, and spent the next 27 years hiding out. He survived by living off the land and robbing cabins. But even a hermit has to bend the knee to something . . . and he emerged from the woods venerating a mushroom that he grew to love, protect and cherish.



Everybody has to bend the knee to someone or something. Even a garden hermit. The choice is ours. But we all must bend. Who's that "Dragon Queen" in your life to whom you bend the knee? Some choose to bend the knee to fame, and so they worship the cult of celebrity. Some choose to bend the knee to money, and so they worship Wall Street. Some choose to bend the knee to consumerism, and so they worship Madison Avenue or Rodeo Drive. Some choose to bend the knee only to themselves, and so they worship Narcissus. Or as a Bob Dylan song says: "You may be an ambassador to England or France / You may like to gamble, you might like to dance / You may be the heavyweight champion of the world / You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls / But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes / Indeed you're gonna have to serve somebody / Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord / But you're gonna have to serve somebody."

In his letter to the Philippi church, St. Paul tells what their faith community should look like and how it should operate. Paul calls on the Philippians to be fully committed to living out their new life in Jesus the Messiah, "thinking with the same mind" as Jesus. For Paul, there's no

willy-nilly faith, only a connectional faith where the Savior is the absolute center of everything.

In 1st century societies controlled by Roman authority, high social status and exalted honor were life's command control. Everyday existence revolved around a dog-eat-dog struggle to rise among the ranks, to demonstrate one's superiority in deeds and merit by upending and upscaling others. Thus, even today, Paul's directive to the Philippians is nothing less than shocking. Even revolutionary of the social order: "Never act out of selfish ambition or vanity; instead, regard everybody else as your superior" (v.3).

Humility was viewed by 1st century Rome as a virtue. But not for the "big shots." Humility was quite specifically a "slave virtue," the appropriate subservient attitude taken by slaves and those so-called dregs in the lowest classes. But the Greek root for the word humility, "tapeinoo" means literally "to level the mountain." The example put before the Philippians is that of Jesus, God's Messiah, the "mountain," who chooses to be made low. Jesus, the Maker of Heaven and Earth, willfully steps off his throne and "takes a knee" to be among all the

people of this broken world. In the act of incarnation, the very being of the one, true God took a knee. When you bellow out “Merry Christmas!” less than three months from now, remember that God took a knee.



Paul declares that followers of the Messiah, those who share the mind of this Messiah,, should humble themselves before others — just as Jesus did. And not only that, they should actually “regard everybody else as...superior.” That is they are to esteem others as actually surpassing themselves. No matter what our position in this modern Roman cultural pecking order, we are to position ourselves vis-a-vis others in a bowed posture.

Few directives are more countercultural to everything the world has taught us to value—whether in the 1st or in the 21st century. Paul continues to describe the “mind of the Messiah” by quoting one of the earliest hymn of the ancient church. The beautiful “Christ hymn” (the “Carmine Christi”) found in verses 5-11. Do you mind if we hear it again? Of course you don’t because you have the same mind as King Jesus, right?

Who, though in God's form, did not
regard his equality with God
as something he ought to exploit.
Instead, he emptied himself,
and received the form of a slave,
being born in the likeness of humans.
And then, having human appearance,
he humbled himself, and became
obedient even to death,
yes, even the death of the cross.
And so God has greatly exalted him,
and to him in his favour has given
the name which is over all names:
That now at the name of Jesus
every knee within heaven shall bow –
on earth, too, and under the earth;
And every tongue shall confess
that Jesus, Messiah, is Lord,
to the glory of God, the father.

What better describes this new posture, this new relationship with the
world, with each other, and with each new generation of Christians?

This ancient hymn extolls the Jesus who, though he existed “in God’s form,” willingly took on “the form of a slave” and so “humbled himself” and was “obedient” even “to death on a cross.”

What the world sees as a tragically bad ending to the story of Jesus is revealed as just the beginning of God’s new thing to those who believe. A horrible ending is strangely a new beginning for both heaven and earth. God exalted the crucified Jesus and gave to him “the name which is over all names.” It is now to “Jesus, the Messiah, the Lord” that “every knee shall bow” and “every tongue confess” to the glory of God the father.

Christians are called first and foremost to “take a knee” for Jesus. Only Jesus is Messiah and Lord. Only Jesus, King of kings and Lord of lords, is worthy of this ultimate homage. The pinnacle of Christian faith is found on our patella (i.e. kneecap). We grow tall on our knees. I often wish we Protestants kept the kneelers worship space because maybe we Protestants have protested so much over the years that we forgot just how important body posture is for prayer. Most of us like the Nativity carol “O Holy Night.” Remember the words? — “Fall on your

knees, O hear the angel voices! / O night divine, O night when Christ was born! / O night, O holy night, O night divine!” I think it was omitted from the Methodist hymnal because it can be a real strain for



congregations to hit the high notes without scaring the baby Jesus. But regardless, it’s not until you fall on your knees that you can stand up to your true self, to the person that God is wanting you to be.

We’re also called to bow low for everyone we encounter, since everyone we meet is created in the image of God. Taking the knee for the Messiah means we serve him, and to serve the Messiah, the One who took “the form of a slave” and “humbled himself” for our sake, means that we, too, “take a knee” for others, even as Jesus himself did for us.

If your heart were a prayer cushion, how would your knees face?

Toward yourself, or toward others and the world God loves?

In modern western culture, when greeting others, we extend our hands to each other — COVID being beside the point. The handshake is an egalitarian gesture, both parties remain upright, and both parties

extend a measure of honor to the other as their hands are clasped. We also size others up by their handshake. How many times have you had your hand crushed by someone anxious to make a point about their personal power? How many times have you withdrawn your own hand with distaste from a weak handshake?

But in eastern culture, the tradition of bowing still endures. Greet someone from Japan or South Korea and you learn to bow. Bowing down to others isn't a sign of subservience, but rather a sign of respect, and an offer of service from a position of strength.



To bow is to confess that we have something to learn from each person we encounter. As Jesus showed when he engaged not just the religious establishment and Roman authorities — but the tax collectors, little children, and even Gentiles — everyone has something to teach us. In western culture, the handshake announces ourselves. It proclaims our name and claims our purposes. In eastern culture, the bow is done in silence. When one bows to another it's a sign to ourselves to listen to the other, to learn what we can from the one we are standing before.

It's in this bowed stance that we view the person before us as Jesus in disguise, and look for what Jesus is already up to in their lives so that we can nudge it further and learn from it ourselves. What can we see of Jesus in their personage? What can we learn about Jesus through their presence?

Are you ready to take a knee? Our ancestors, when they prayed, always changed their posture. Some would stand for certain prayers. Other prayers were prayed on their knees. Once upon a time Methodists were known for kneeling, or what some called the "sanctified squat." Are you ready to bow your heads? Are you ready to drop the knee?

Sometime this week, if it's safe and you are physically able, take a knee and pray to the King of kings and Lord of lords, asking God to help his church learn the humility that Paul is clothing us in this morning. If you're unable to actually get down that low, just take a bow. With God a



little sincerity goes a long way. If such a posture of the heart wasn't beyond either Jesus or Paul, it's not beyond you and me either.

Humanity got real hurt bad once upon a time on a field of green called Eden. The Bible is the story of the one true God who in his love for the world took a knee for us and for our salvation.

Amen.