



First United Church of Oak Park

Watch Out!

Philippians 2:1-11

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Philippians 2:1-11 (CEB)

2 Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any sympathy, 2 complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other. 3 Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. 4 Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. 5 Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus:

6 Though he was in the form of God,
he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.

7 But he emptied himself
by taking the form of a slave
and by becoming like human beings.

When he found himself in the form of a human,

8 he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.

9 Therefore, God highly honored him
and gave him a name above all names,

10 so that at the name of Jesus everyone
in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow

11 and every tongue confess that
Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

What do I mean by watch out?

This week, science taught me something about the grace of God. As a child, I was taught the doctrine of original sin—that from my birth, I was a sinning machine. I learned that I was born a sinful creature in need of God's grace and forgiveness. Well, science suggests that perhaps what we actually have is an original blessing, but we've just forgotten about it.

Science journalist Matthew Hutson gathered studies that looked at human morality and at whether we are naturally selfish, or as religious folks would say, sinful creatures. He found that, contrary to what I was taught as a child, humans are impulsively selfless. In a day when selfishness and narcissism gets a lot of media coverage, it may be hard to believe, but thank God for the scientific process. This is not to say that humans do not sin and sin hard, but multiple studies using multiple models show that given the choice between self-interest or serving the common good, humans serve the common good, especially when asked to act quickly, or on their gut impulse.

One study gave participants money and gave them the option to put any amount they wanted into the common pot that would serve the whole group. Some participants were asked to decide immediately, others were given time to deliberate. Those who decided immediately gave generously to help the other participants.

Those given time eventually justified keeping more money for themselves. Human impulse tells us to care for one another. However, over time, we are more likely to talk ourselves out of generosity and compassion, and into selfish gain. Study after study confirmed this.

All the studies that Hutson looked at showed that selfishness can be learned. If someone is exposed to an environment that is itself a study in selfishness, or if they are not actively encouraged to maintain their impulsive compassion and to continue acting with humility... they will grow more and more self-centered.

Merriam Webster defines humility as freedom from pride or arrogance. I love that it's described as freedom from something, because the flip side of this definition is that self-interest and pride are bondage. Outward focus is freedom.

Walking home from a church meeting this week, I was doing that stupid thing I wish I didn't do: staring at my phone, hunched inward, gazing toward my own navel. It looks ridiculous and it does feel like bondage, doesn't it? Steve Pederson of our congregation was walking toward me, but obviously I didn't know that or see him because I was hunched over! Steve jokingly said, "You need to watch where you're going!"

He was joking, but seriously, I need to watch out! There is nothing to be gained from walking through our beautiful village full of beautiful people like this [demonstrates hunched posture] in the bondage of self-interest. The moment I looked up and engaged in conversation with Steve, I felt happier.

The Dalai Lama says, "If you develop a strong sense of concern for the well-being of all sentient beings and in particular human beings, this will make you happy in the morning even before coffee."

I would love to be happy in the morning before coffee! Those who know me know that I don't even speak until I'm about a cup and a half in. As you might have noticed, if ever I have preached a sermon to myself, it is this one. So how in the world can someone like me, who has exists in an environment that is a study in selfishness, return to my natural impulses of compassion, of care, of blessing, of watching out instead of in?

Jesus watching out for us

Well, one thing that I can do is study stories of selflessness and work toward imitating them. There are many stories from every country, language, and religion that can lead us in that direction. I happen to think that in our Christian tradition, we have an incredibly powerful one. Jesus watched out for people.

People like you and me, who, because of their age or their mental or physical health, or their occupation, had become inwardly focused and completely lost their sense of belonging to their community. He restored them to a sense of belonging and unity with their community through some kind of change or healing.

Now, I don't believe Jesus healed lepers because there's something wrong with having a disease; I believe Jesus healed lepers because there's something wrong with being shunned, with losing your relationships and your sense of belonging to all sentient beings, especially your fellow humans. The example of Jesus' humility and complete lack of self-interest led him all the way to the ultimate act of humility: taking the consequences of caring for others even when the consequence was his own, very public humiliation and death.

To me, the stories of Jesus watching out for others aren't only an example to follow. Through my faith, they are evidence that the living Christ who dwells deep within now watches out for me too. If the selfless spirit of Christ is watching out for me and I know deeply that I am cared for even in difficult times, I can be free to follow the selfless impulse I know I have somewhere deep within, and I know I can access it if I stop over-thinking and just go with my gut.

We watch out for each other

There are those among us who know how to access their selfless impulse. They do so every Sunday morning. They take time out of their week to prepare a story or activity that will teach our children and youth to watch out for others. They arrive early and prepare themselves. They negotiate and cooperate with their co-teachers. They keep the best interest of our children and youth always at heart.

They are church school leaders and their work transforms the lives of our children and youth. They are watching out for those who are more vulnerable than they are; they are hearing our children's joys and concerns; they are treating them with respect. They are modeling and teaching the humble attitude of Christ Jesus. They are also watching out for parents. Because even though parents are their children's primary spiritual role models and educators, we know they need some help along the way. Our church school is just one way that we watch out for each other here at First United.

We watch out for others

There are days when I am gathered with members of First United and I think about the disciples gathering. I sense the disciples' close bonds and sense of belonging to one another. I also think about the way the disciples went through life with Jesus, learning all along the way.

The disciples were often at first confused by Jesus' actions... Jesus, why are you trying to feed all these people when we don't have enough food? (Luke 9:13-17) Jesus, why are you letting children waste your time when there are important adults we need to see? (Luke 18:15-17) Jesus, why don't you tell us which one of us is the greatest? (Luke 9:46-48)

How often have I been confused along this journey and asked God to tell me I'm the greatest? I'm sure you've done it too. The greatest teacher, lawyer, parent, social worker, preacher, or whatever identity you look to for your own worth. How often have I hoped for Jesus to make us the greatest church, rather than hoping to be the church that watches out for others with the greatest humility and love? Well, as he does for me often, Jesus set the disciples right when they ask who is the greatest; whoever decides they want to be the greatest, you'll end up the least. That's how self-interest and pride work. They are bondage. But Jesus says, whoever is least among you, putting others ahead of himself, well, you'll be great. Because humility is freedom!

As you pack up flat Jesus and head out for your summer adventures, will you wander this world hunched over and self-interested, or will you go with your gut, and find your true freedom by watching out?

I pray that we, the people of First United, be known for having the humble attitude of Christ, watching out for each other, and for all sentient beings, especially our fellow human beings, so that we can wake up happy in the morning, even before coffee. Amen.