

WINNING VALUES

Philippians 2: 5-11

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I don't like the word "obey". I suspect I'm not alone in that. I have officiated at hundreds of weddings, but I have never suggested that the word "obey" be a part of the wedding vows. It doesn't seem like a word that is part of healthy couples communication to me, and besides, there was a long tradition that insisted that the word "obey" was a part of the wife's vows and not the husband's. And I wasn't going to perpetuate that!

I don't even like the word "obedience" much. It's fine if you're taking your dogs to obedience school, to train them. But I'm not as comfortable thinking of children or people being obedient...where is the room for freedom, for personal expression? The word sounds moralistic.

I struggle with these words because -- and I'm sure I'm not alone in this -- I crave my independence. I covet my independence. I may even sometimes worship my independence. I don't like to be told what to do.

And yet, there it is in the Bible. Here it is coming from the mouth of Jesus: "If you love me, obey my commandments." Jesus doesn't want followers in name only. Jesus wants disciples who put into practice the values he himself taught and lived. In one of the resurrection appearances, Jesus says to Peter, "If you love me, feed my sheep." Carry on the work that I have begun.

And here it is featured prominently in our passage for today, the word “obedience” alongside its companion, the word “humility”, another concept that has fallen out of favor.

This passage of Philippians starts by asking us to take on the mindset of Jesus. Think as he thought. Feel as he felt. Live as he lived.

Jesus life was characterized by these three qualities: service, humility, and obedience.

Notably absent in Jesus’ life was a focus on himself. He emptied himself of ego, and in its place put God and love.

It gave him a cross-shaped life, a life that stretched its arms out towards all people in love, a love that embraced Gentiles and Samaritans when that was considered scandalous for Jews to do, a love that embraced women and children in a time when they were considered little more than property, a love that looked beggars in the eye, a love that touched the leper, a love that could argue with the Pharisee one minute and eat dinner at his table the next.

Jesus lived a cross-shaped life, a life that reached towards God, constantly nourishing itself through prayer, through worship, through study, through nature and silence. Reaching up to the heavens to receive inspiration, and at the same time, Jesus’ life was rooted in this real life which God loved and created.

Because Jesus was obedient, he could speak the truth in love, without being paralyzed by fear. He wasn’t an activist for the sake of politics, or for the attention. He was a political activist out of principle, and because he cared about the people who

were hurt by the injustices and oppression of the Roman Empire. He was a religious rabble-rouser not because he liked to stir the pot, but because he believed the religious authorities had distorted God's will by focusing on rules rather than love.

Jesus rides into Jerusalem fully aware of the danger he might encounter there. If you're a known activist, and you show up on the White House lawn, you have a pretty good idea you're going to be noticed.

Jerusalem was packed for the celebration of the Passover. The population swelled every year as pilgrims arrived from the surrounding countryside. Rome was there in full force with cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, helmets, weapons, banners...they made their presence known. To keep the peace, and to remind the people who's in charge.

So Jesus rides into Jerusalem, where he knows he will encounter both religious and political officials, both groups he's offended and criticized, both groups who are suspicious of him and worried about his popularity.

He enters the city on a donkey, a symbol not of power but of poverty and humility. People follow him, but he hasn't drummed up support for himself. This isn't about him. Jesus' focus is never on himself, but on those he came to serve, and on the one who called him. The cross-shaped life.

If this kind of living sounds too hard, just too unrealistic...to focus on humility and obedience and service in a world that celebrates ego and worships celebrity, let me suggest that for many people today, living according to the values of this world isn't working very well. Unhappiness and anxiety are rampant, as are all of the ways we try

to hide from those feelings, escape those feelings. We spend too much time in front of screens, we shop, we eat, we drink, we distract ourselves, we anesthetize ourselves. The opiate epidemic is but the most publicized effect of people reaching the end of their rope.

Don't all of us long for a different way of life sometimes? A world that revolves around different values? Don't we ache for a kinder world? And don't we wish that we could be saved from the worst parts of ourselves? From thinking incessantly about our own comforts, our own pleasures?

Jesus doesn't preach at us. Instead, he shows us what a cross-shaped life looks like. A life stretched up, so that we can be lifted above some of the mundane concerns and petty obsessions of this life. A life rooted in God's love, a life that notices the pleasures of this world and appreciates the joys of daily life, a life firmly planted in the ground of our being. And a life stretched out, not to martyr ourselves, but to find the deep joy of serving others, and the freedom that is found when we stop worrying at every minute about what is making us happy.

I don't really like the word "obedient" but the more I think about it, it is deeply comforting to be reminded that we are called to be obedient to the God of the universe who wants the very best for us. Here's how one writer puts it, including a reference from Abraham Lincoln: "In each Christian life that time will come when we are driven to our knees. A loved one will die. We will lose a job. A routine doctor's visit will reveal a disease. We can no longer deny that we have an addiction. A relationship will unravel. That is the moment we realize the limit of our human strength alone. That is the

moment we realize that our own resources are inadequate. Abraham Lincoln famously said, 'I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had absolutely no other place to go.' Faith is found when we rely on God in these lowest points of our lives, Hope is born when we discover that God is with us."

Humility and obedience go hand in hand. To be humble literally means to be human - you can see the way the words are similar. To be humble means to remember that we are human and God is God, and we are most fully human when we are aware of our relationship with God. It isn't a relationship of coercion. We don't obey because we've been trained to, as a dog in obedience school. It is an obedience born from love. We want to lean into God because there we find the deepest joy, meaning and purpose. Life according to God's values brings us the peace for which we long. Not an idle peace, but a purposeful peace, a partnership with God in bringing about justice and compassion.

How do you do it? How do you live a cross-shaped life? You watch out for your neighbors, attentive to ways you can be of service. You help with Habitat for Humanity, either giving time or money or both. You pray for our mission in India. You volunteer to help with Vacation Bible School or you become a confirmation mentor, you lend your talent to our bell choir or vocal choir or worship band. You become an AA sponsor or a Stephen Minister. If you look for ways that you can be of service, the path will open itself up to you.

During Lent, Jane Sheard has been posting a picture a day on Facebook of a person she considers to be ordinary and extraordinary at the same time - people who

brighten up our world with their kindness, people whose service is overlooked. She has highlighted people who work at the Avon Lake Service Department, the post office, and at Giant Eagle. She has noticed their small acts of friendship, their examples of going the extra mile, their humility, she has listened to their stories. Looking at her posts every day has been a wonderful spiritual discipline for me, and for many others who are reading them. I have been reminded of how many times I walk right past people, not thinking about them as people who are serving me in important ways. There are a lot of examples of cross-shaped living among us.

As we enter this Holy Week, there is one thing we have in common with Jesus. We are all called to obedience, a word I am coming to appreciate the more I pray on it. Our passage says that Jesus was called to be obedient to the point of death. Aren't we all? We are all as free as Jesus to live as we wish from this time on until we take our last breath. We can choose self-absorption or we can try to empty ourselves of ego. We can try to accumulate as much as we can or we can try to give ourselves away for the sake of love.

Let us cheer Jesus on as he enters Jerusalem, let us be part of the crowd that shouts "Hosanna", that waves palm branches, because we have the gift of Jesus and his example of cross-shaped living. Following him won't come easy, of course not, not this Holy Week, and not during the rest of our lifetimes. Discipleship won't be without risk. But is there any other way you'd want to spend your days, your life?