

Sermon Preached
by Doug King
Sunday September 29, 2002
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Philippians 2:1-13

My friend Tom Are tells this story of the summer his family moved to Jacksonville. He writes,

"One of the new things in life that resulted from the move was the ice cream truck. You know the kind. The old, run down, panel type trucks. They have stickers plastered on them of ice cream cones and popsicles of every color. On top is a funnel type speaker that blares out some monotonous tune like 'It's a small world' or 'We are the lollipop guild.' The music sounds like it was recorded with poor equipment from an organ bought at the mall. The jangling tune rings out over the afternoon breezes in the neighborhood and causes every child to stop whatever they are doing and run to their mom or dad with desperate pleading for \$1.50 before the truck gets away."

When they first moved to town Tom's son heard the music and asked 'Dad, what is that?' Tom writes,

"I don't know why I said what I said, really I don't. I don't think it was the daily \$1.50 alone, or even the premonition of supper ruined for the summer. But I heard myself say, 'Nathan,...that's a music truck, son.' 'A what?' It's true. The truck never comes without the music. 'I guess he knows how much children like music.' 'Cool.' But things were not so cool for too long. For days the music truck passed through the neighborhood bringing joy and delight to my children's ears. But one day the truck stopped right in front of our house, with a gaggle of kids making trades for snow cones and double dipper delight. Nathan spotted the activity, investigated, and returned to me. 'Dad, Dad, you won't believe it. I've got great news. The music truck has ice cream.' 'Really?' 'Yeah, Dad, I think it's been there all along, and we missed it.'"

Later on we will get a glimpse into why Tom torments his children so but right now I think Tom's son Nathan has touched upon Paul's concern for the church at Philippi. The church was a bustling active place but the folks there just could not stop their bickering. General Assembly amendments A-Z, everybody had the right answer, everybody had the perfect distilled theological truth and was anxious to tell everybody else where they had gone wrong. Politics, everybody knew God's will for the world with every issue. And do not even get them started about the debate over the color of the drapes in the fellowship hall.

Now the Philippians were hearing the music coming from that old truck, they were worshipping together, and going to bible study classes they knew all the stories about Jesus by heart. But somewhere along the way they stopped listening to the music that was being played for them. They stopped remembering the message of that melody they were aimlessly humming as they went about the business of being the church. They forgot that the music being played was a sign of the amazing reality of the gift of Jesus the Christ. They forgot that just as sure as the strained tune of "It's a small world, "Is the sure announcement of sweet frozen dairy delights, the music they were hearing was a symbol of the sure promise of God's never-failing overwhelming love.

In this text Paul is reminding them that listening to the music and arguing what key it should be played in is not what it is all about. Paul writes "If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy..." and of course they remember. Of course Paul we remember. Paul quotes from the Christ hymn, which they probably all knew by heart, dog-eared in their hymnals, of Jesus the Christ's loving choice to take human form and be humbled and to be obedient to God. And God's choice to lift Jesus up that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Of course Paul now we remember the immensity of what we have been given. How could we ever be so haughty as to strut around arguing with each other as if each of us were little Lords?

But Paul is not seeking to cut the bickering Philippians down to size. This text is not about shaming them into some perpetual self-flagellating state of inferiority. The humility Paul is calling them to is not one of unworthiness, but a humility born of the understanding of the vastness of what has been given to them. 'Let the same mind be in you that you have in Christ Jesus.' Paul reminds the Philippians that they already have the mind of Christ within them. The humility that Paul is calling them to is not merely a recognition that they are not God but also a recognition of their distinct special place as humans created in the image of God.

Often times texts such as these have been used to denigrate the essence of what it means to be human. But Paul has told us that our humanity includes the mind of Christ. Jesus' life is not a story of someone denying or living beyond their humanity but rather the example of a person living out their full humanity. We were created in the image of God that we could be in constant loving relationship with the divine and with each other. Our mistakes, our sins are not proof of our humanity they are distortions of it. When we screw something up we often say to ourselves "Well, I am only human." as if it was our humanity that is to blame rather than our inhumanity. Jesus demonstrated that this was not true. In Jesus we see who we are to be, who we are to become, who we are being led to be by God's sometimes subtle but always inexorable pull upon our lives. We are being called into our full humanity, into our destiny, as a loving and faithful humanity.

Another story from Tom Are, this time from his childhood, which may illuminate from where his parenting methodology comes.

"Every father knows, not every Father tells, but every father knows that the only way to catch a bird is to sprinkle salt on the bird's tail." Tom told his father that he wanted a bird. "'A bird,' he said. 'Great day son, we already have three cats, two dogs and a yard full of squirrels, what do you want a bird for?' 'Not a pet store bird Dad. I want that blue one in the backyard.' He smiled a little, 'well sure son, all you have to do is take

this salt shaker, sprinkle salt on his tail and then he can't fly. You just scoop him up, bring him inside, give him to your mama.'

There is a flaw in this system. The bird seldom poses for this exercise. I chased that bird all spring. I would have killed the grass in the back yard if I had been a little more persistent. Soon I changed strategy. I built a trap. I got a box. Propped it up with a stick. Underneath the box I put peanut butter, and twinkies, kool-aid, and bananas. I tied a string around the stick and hid behind the garage, and I waited. Several birds flew down and hopped around, but finally a Blue Jay stepped under the box. I pulled the string, the stick came out, and the box came down. I had a bird. He was the maddest blue jay in Alabama, but he was a bird. I had put the box on top of a window screen, so I flipped the whole thing over, and I had the box, the bird in the box, the screen on top of the box, and I was standing there with a whole box of 'when it rains it pours.' I got salt on that bird's tail. I got it on his wings, his head, his back; I just chased him around the box. By the time I emptied the saltbox that bird was knee deep in salt.

I opened the screen, just that much. Tom's daddy lied to him. That bird flew out of there so fast I didn't even see him. I could trap the bird. I could salt the bird. I could put him in a cage and keep him in my room. What I could not do is change the fact that God made the bird to fly."

It is the same way with us. Our selfishness, our haughty bickering and divisive posturing, our mistakes, our inhumanity can bind us up and box us in temporarily, but we have been created by God to be human; to be human the way in which Jesus was human; to be human by bowing down in joyful oblation to the one who creates and redeems and sustains on each new day; to be human by loving beyond the limits of our precious self concerns; to be human by recognizing we have been granted the great gift of a God who chooses to love us for as long as it takes us to learn this lesson and beyond.

Let us listen closely for the music, the melody, of a God who has sacrificed everything for us. Let us fly out of our cages of inhuman conceit into the freedom of fully human humility. Let us be like children hearing the sound of the ice cream truck on a sunny summer afternoon. Let us be filled with anxious anticipation and delight at the promise of God's never-failing overwhelming love. Amen.