

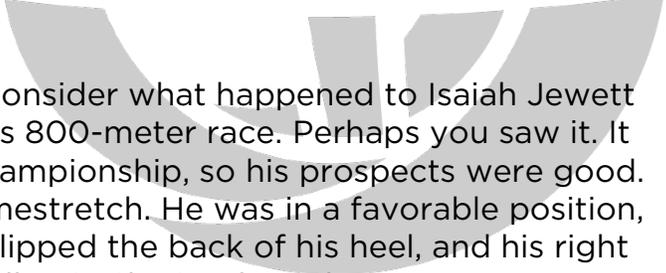
*The Deep-Down Joy of Imitating Christ*  
Pastor Vern Christopherson

**Philippians 1:27-2:11 NRSV**

<sup>27</sup>Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, <sup>28</sup>and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. <sup>29</sup>For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well — <sup>30</sup>since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have. <sup>1</sup>If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, <sup>2</sup>make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. <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, 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.

Towards the end of Philippians 1, Paul tells the house church in Philippi that he hopes to come and see them soon. That would entail Paul getting released from prison. As his letter is read during worship, you can almost hear those who are gathered burst into applause. As Paul says it, though, he backtracks a bit: “Whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I want you to stand side by side in the faith. That’s important to me!” We’re not exactly sure what’s going on in Philippi, both in the city and in the church, but Paul is hinting of troubles that are brewing for the early followers of Jesus.

Since Philippians is a letter, and we’re only getting one side of the story, we have to read between the lines. The first part of today’s passage mentions troubles in the city of Philippi itself. Maybe it’s with city officials; maybe it’s with a pagan temple down the street; maybe it’s with next-door neighbors who think the story of Jesus is downright silly. Whatever it is, the Christians in Philippi are suddenly feeling like they have “opponents.” “Live your lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ,” Paul exhorts them. “You don’t have to apologize for following Jesus, but don’t be a jerk about it. People are watching. What you say and do is a witness to them.”



Want an example of what this might look like? Consider what happened to Isaiah Jewett in the Tokyo Olympics. He was running the men's 800-meter race. Perhaps you saw it. It was the semifinals. Jewett had won an NCAA championship, so his prospects were good. He was on the backstretch, heading into the homestretch. He was in a favorable position, ready to start his final kick. And then someone clipped the back of his heel, and his right leg smacked into his left leg. He stumbled and fell onto the track. In the process, a runner from Botswana – Nijel Amos – tripped over Jewett and crumpled up beside him.

Jewett scrapped himself off the track and took a step toward Amos. Now what? Surprisingly, Jewett didn't point a finger of blame or shake a fist in anger. He didn't appear angry at all. Rather, he extended his hand toward the Botswanan. "Come on, man," said Jewett, and he pulled him up to his feet.

"I'm sorry," said Amos. Jewett responded, "Let's just finish the race." So, they put their arms around each other. They trotted down the track shoulder to shoulder, blood trickling down Jewett's leg. They crossed the finish line about a minute behind the leaders.

I don't know if Jewett is a Christian, but his was a Christ-like action. It was humble and gracious. Paul is telling the Philippians- and us: "When you bump into opponents in the world in which you live, don't shake your fist in anger; instead, extend a hand to them. The world may come to see that you are suffering for Christ."

The Philippians are facing troubles within their church too. Again, we're not sure what the issues are. We'll hear more about them in chapter 4. No big surprise. Churches are made up of people. We fight over everything from the style of music, to the use of masks, to how we decorate the place.

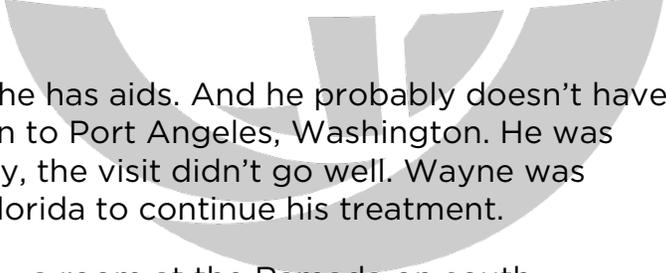
Paul founded the congregation a few years before. He pours out his heart to them: "If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any compassion and sympathy, please do me a favor: Be of the same mind! Have the same love! Don't insist on getting your way!"

Friends, when was the last time you saw troubles in church? Probably not that long ago. They happen. Being part of a church is not for the faint of heart. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit," Paul urges, "but in humility regard others as better than yourselves."

Want to see how churches can struggle? I got a call late Thursday morning from a man named Wayne. His voice was weak. I could barely make out what he was saying. He told me he was on his way back to Florida. He was wondering if we were an *e/ca* church – by which he meant ELCA – which was his way of asking if we were accepting of gay people. I told him, "Yes, we are an *e/ca* church, and yes, we are accepting of those who are gay."

Wayne continued. He asked if we could pay for an additional night's lodging at his hotel. Truth be told, we get calls like this often. We're certainly not opposed to helping – we have a Good Samaritan fund – but before we use it, we at least try to check out the details.





Wayne's story was complicated. He shared that he has aids. And he probably doesn't have long to live. In the last couple of weeks he'd been to Port Angeles, Washington. He was attempting to reunite with his parents. Sad to say, the visit didn't go well. Wayne was coming through Rochester on his way back to Florida to continue his treatment.

We ended up paying the hotel for another night - a room at the Ramada on south Broadway. Tracy Schar brought the church credit card. Later I called Wayne and asked if I could come by and pray with him. We met in the hotel lobby. He told me he was 50 years old. He looked like he weighed somewhere around 110 pounds. Despite limited energy, he seemed eager to talk.

He told me his parents had gotten mixed up with Westboro Baptist Church, a notoriously homophobic church. They'd become harshly critical of him. They spouted things like: "God hates gays! You're no longer our son! You must never come here again!"

Wayne was deeply wounded. He didn't understand how Christians could be so judgmental, so cruel. I asked about his connection with an e/ca church. He said that his former partner got him going to an ELCA church in Florida - Redeemer Lutheran. The pastor's wife had a son who was gay. They seemed more accepting than most. And then he added, "My partner had aids too - and died from it - but I've kept going. I've heard more about the love and acceptance of Jesus from my church family than I've ever heard from my own. They're the only family I've got left."

Paul doesn't spell out in detail how we're supposed to treat each other in the church. There's no long list of imperatives: *Do this! Don't do that!* Paul does share a hymn - he probably didn't write it himself - but it's meant to inspire us. As I see it, the hymn sounds a lot more like Redeemer Lutheran than Westboro Baptist.

Listen to it from the Message version: "Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, becoming human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death---and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion. Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ. And they will call out in praise that he is the Lord of all."

Why does Paul use this hymn? Not to scold us. Not to raise us up like Christ himself. But rather to give us a sense of the deep-down joy of imitating Christ. The Philippians are living in a culture and a church that is marred by self-serving behavior. As Paul sees it, they need a reminder of the event and the person that gave them life in the first place.





The hymn in Philippians – it’s often referred to as “the Christ Hymn” – makes me think of a hymn we sometimes sing at Zumbro:

Will be you let me be your servant,  
Let me be as Christ to you?  
Pray that I may have the grace  
To let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey  
We are travelers on the road.  
We are here to help each other  
Walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christ-light for you  
In the nighttime of your fear.  
I will hold my hand out to you,  
Speak the peace we long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping,  
When you laugh I’ll laugh with you.  
I will share your joy and sorry  
Till we’ve seen this journey through.

Friends, whether you’re holding out your hand to someone who’s fallen or letting a downcast person know that you’ve got room for them in your life, we are called to be Christ-like in our words and deeds. As we do these things and more, we might even find a deep-down joy in imitating Christ.

