Philippians 2:1-13
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 27. 2026
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The late, great Annie Dillard, now of blessed memory, once wrote: *"Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church. We should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares. They should lash us to our pews."*

Maybe Annie Dillard understood just how dangerous words like Paul's really are. Because Paul is sitting in prison, writing to Christians living in a Roman colony, a world that knew exactly what power looked like. Rome knew what power looked like. Caesar knew what power looked like. We know what power looks like. And Paul says: *Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. But emptied himself. Taking the form of a slave. Being born in human likeness. He humbled himself. And became obedient to the point of death-even death on a cross.* God into flesh. Flesh into slavery. All the way down to a cross.

We have spent an awful lot of human history trying to climb our way up to God. And Paul says: Did you miss it? God went the other way. And this is one of the most dangerous claims Christianity has ever made about God. Because Jesus does not replace Caesar by becoming a better Caesar. Jesus does not defeat empire by becoming better at empire. The one who is in the form of God does not exploit it. God does not grasp or clutch or need to prove that God is God. God is free enough to give Godself away. And if this is true, then perhaps the cross is not the moment when Jesus stops looking like God. Perhaps the cross is the moment when we finally see what God is like.

And Lord knows, we know the other kind of power. We are watching it all around us. Power concentrating extraordinary wealth into fewer and fewer hands. Power testing the limits of democracy. Power feeding racism and misogyny and telling queer and trans people that rights we thought were secure may not be secure after all. Power consuming the earth as though there will always be another earth waiting for us. We know what grasping for power looks like. And Paul says: God does not grasp.

But here is where this gets dangerous. Because Paul isn't simply telling the Philippians what is wrong with Caesar. Paul says: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Oh. Because Caesar isn't only out there. The scandal of Christ is that he does not merely expose the empires of the world; he exposes the empire we carry around inside ourselves. The impulse to grasp is in here. The need to win and to be right and to protect what is mine. To prove that I matter. To control the outcome. To make somebody else smaller so I can feel larger. But self-emptying is not self-erasure. Kenosis does not ask the oppressed to disappear so that the powerful can remain comfortable. We refuse to let domination teach us how to resist domination. We tell the truth. We stand with people who are targeted. We protect and organize and vote and protest. We use whatever power we have in the service of love. But the answer to domination cannot simply be domination with ourselves finally in charge.

And then Paul says this strange thing: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." And that "your" is plural. You all. All y'all. Work out together what salvation looks like among you. And

before we can turn even that into another spiritual achievement project, Paul stops us: *"For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."* God works in. We work it out. I need that distinction because I can make kenosis—self-emptying—into another job. I could become the best self-emptying Christian in Memphis. Put it on my résumé. Excellent at humility. A+. But you cannot achieve your way out of achievement. You cannot perfect your way into grace. At some point-you consent. Our Prayer Book says it beautifully: "that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways." Not simply *do* your will. Delight in it. What if salvation reaches all the way down into desire? What if God is changing not only what we do-but what we want? Annie Dillard would be passing out the life preservers.

Years ago, when I lived in New York, I worked a retail job. And I remember complaining about it to a friend who was something of a spiritual advisor to me. "It's just a retail job." And he said, "Oh my God, Wesley. Think of all the opportunities you have to be of service." I thought that was very spiritual of him. And then one day an elderly woman came up to me. Her shoe was untied, and very quietly, almost embarrassed, she asked if I would tie it for her. And I was embarrassed too. There was something strangely intimate about it. But I got down on the floor, and I tied her shoe. And as I knelt there at this stranger's feet, something happened. I wasn't tying a stranger's shoe anymore. I was tying my grandmother's shoe. My grandmother had been dead for nearly twenty years. And for just a moment, the distance disappeared. Stranger, grandmother, her need, my embarrassment. Somehow, down there on the floor, there was only tenderness. I didn't wake up that morning and decide to practice kenosis. I just got down on the floor. And maybe the retail floor wasn't interrupting my spiritual life. Maybe the floor was where God was. And once you start looking for that kind of love, you can't miss it.

My mother raised five children, and for a good part of that time she was essentially a single mother. There were times she went without so that we could have school clothes, or go on the field trip, or have whatever it was that children needed. Because she was my momma, I used to think there was something extraordinary about that. And there was. But it wasn't rare. That's the thing. This is happening everywhere. There is more self-emptying love happening in Memphis right now this morning than we will ever know. Maybe it's hard to find grand examples of kenosis because people who are actually doing it don't usually announce it. Caesar builds monuments. Love ties somebody's shoe.

I need two more verses from Philippians this morning. Because Paul isn't quite finished, and I don't think we can be either. He says: *"Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which…*you shine like stars in the world."

Maybe salvation is God gradually making us into people who don't have to grasp anymore. People who don't have to win in order to know who they are. People who can spend their power protecting somebody else. People free enough to give themselves away.

Annie Dillard asked whether we have the foggiest idea what kind of power we invoke in this place. Maybe this is it. The power to love the world without possessing it. The power to resist domination without becoming what we resist. The power to descend without disappearing. The power to give ourselves away because we finally know there is nothing left to prove. The power of the crucified Christ; alive in ordinary human beings. Children of God, in the middle of a dark world. Who no longer need to shine…shining like stars.