

Into the Far Country

Psalm 25:4-10 (NRSV), Philippians 2:1-11 (TNIV) First Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 25:4-10

Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.

Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.

Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.

All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Philippians 2:1-11

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

rather, he made himself nothing

by taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a human being,

he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to death—

even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place

and gave him the name that is above every name,

that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

Giving up safety to travel into harsh conditions is not a very common choice.

The book and movie *Into the Wild* chronicles the real-life adventure of Christopher McCandless, who did just that. McCandless grew up in an affluent family and graduated from Emory University in 1990. Rather than attending Harvard Law, he gives up all of his privilege.

Step by step he rejects his security. He sends \$24000 from his savings to the Oxfam charity. He literally burns his remaining \$500, leaving him penniless. He refuses a new car from his parents, choosing instead his well-worn Datsun...and he leaves that behind as well. He destroys his credit cards and his social security card and drivers license. He owns only what he can carry in

his giant backpack. He gives up all of his security, all while traveling to harsher and harsher conditions, to get to the wilds of Alaska. Camping out in an abandoned bus, he is forced to hunt and fish for food—with less and less success.

McCandless chooses this path out into the wild—no one is forcing him to do it. Giving up safety to go into harsh conditions of your own volition is not a very common choice.

Yet that is what Jesus did. Certainly his motivations were different from McCandless', but his decision to give up all security to go into a harsh environment has a lot in common with *Into the Wild*'s protagonist.

We heard all about it in Philippians 2, our New Testament passage for today. I think I've told you that one of my favorite professors at seminary says that you can sum up all of Paul's letters in eight words: "You are God's children. Now act like it!"

Today's passage has those two pieces backwards, however. Paul starts out with the "now act like it" piece, with several instructions to his readers:

Be likeminded, one in spirit and of one mind.

Do nothing out of selfish or vain conceit.

In humility value others above yourselves.

Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.

Then, he moves to the "you are God's children" part, detailing what Jesus has done for us. Using the words of a hymn that predate him, Paul says that Jesus is fully God, but that he didn't consider equality with God something to benefit himself.

Instead, Jesus gave up all of his safety and security to become human—and not just any kind of human, but a low-status servant who humbled himself and was obedient to God’s will for him—obedient all the way to death on the cross.

This passage is one of the most important in the whole Bible about how Jesus is God—how Jesus Christ the second person of the Trinity has been around since the beginning of time, and how that second person of the Trinity decided to spend time on earth as Jesus of Nazareth, fully human and fully divine.

My favorite theologian, twentieth century writer Karl Barth, put it like this:

[As Jesus Christ] God remains Godself. He does not cease to be God. But God is not aloof. In being gracious to humanity in Jesus Christ, God also goes into the far country, into the evil society of this being, which is not God and against God. God does not shrink from [the far country.]

Like Christopher McCandless, in Jesus Christ God decides to strip away more and more safety and security in order to go into harsher and harsher conditions, where it’s harder and harder to survive. In Jesus God moves into the far country, where sin and brokenness lead to the cross.

The fancy theological word for this is *kenosis*. It comes from the Greek for self-emptying. As Jesus moves into the far country, he empties himself more and more of the security and safety and glory that comes with being God.

As Jesus goes into the far country, he moves in next door to us, into our world—a world where it’s harder and harder to live out the challenges Paul gives us earlier in his passage. The far country is a place where it’s hard to be likeminded. It’s hard to be of one spirit. In the far country people do LOTS of things out of selfish ambition and vain conceit.

And that's where God in Jesus Christ plunged forward, right into the far country. Not because it was going to be great for him, but because it would be great for us.

Putting others before himself was part and parcel of who Jesus was—and Paul challenges us to have that same mindset. Paul challenges us to live faithfully, right here in the far country, along with Jesus, and to fight back against the prevailing winds which drive us to be divisive, to do things out of selfish ambition, and to value ourselves above everyone else.

Such a challenge! That's why it makes me grateful for people who are able to put others before themselves in humility.

That happened for me the second time I ever served communion. I was passing the plates of bread to the elders, and when I grabbed the plates it didn't feel quite right. But I knew I had the tray of bread in my hands, so I went ahead and handed the first tray to the elder. At the same time, though, I handed the napkin from the second tray to her as well. That meant that all the bread on that second tray went all over the floor.

I was pretty mortified—not as much as a friend of mine who dropped a whole tray of juice on the floor the first time he led communion—but I was still pretty embarrassed.

Then after the service, I was eager to clean it up, but before I could a distinguished looking man was on his hands and knees picking it all up. When he looked up, I saw that it was John Wieland. John was the developer of the decade in Atlanta in the 1990s—and had given away millions as a philanthropist. Picking bread off the carpet at the front of the church.

As I look back on it now, he wasn't just cleaning up after me—he was giving me a glimpse of what it looks like to follow Jesus in the far country. I don't want to blow it out of proportion—it was just communion bread on the floor. But at the same time, it was a wonderful sign of someone giving up his status and putting others before himself.

John would fit in great here in Lake Forest. That makes it easy for me to imagine us living out our faith in the far country alongside Jesus, too. Maybe working for public policies that don't benefit ourselves but rather others in worse situations than we are. Certainly volunteering with Bernie's Book Bank or donating to the Neal School supply drive counts. What about forgiving a family member who doesn't deserve to be forgiven?

Maybe one day we'll even have the chance to serve Jesus in the far country in a heroic way. That's what we heard about when Dr. Atef Gendy spoke last week here at the church. He's the president of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, and he told us about Idle (sp?), a student who was doing a summer internship at a church in Delga (sp?) in 2013.

In August, the Muslim Brotherhood began to burn churches throughout Egypt when a new president came into power. They burned down the church in Delga.

Dr. Gendy quickly called Idle and told him that he needed to come back to the seminary where it would be so much more safe and secure.

He was shocked when Idle explained that he was the only pastor that the church had, and that he needed to stay with the parishioners there. He loved them, and he couldn't leave them for his own safety when they couldn't leave themselves. That next Sunday, they worshiped right there, in the ashes of the burnt down church.

They worshiped right there in a harsh place, without safety or security, right next to Jesus.

Dr. Gendy said that in the days after the burnings, all of the Christian leaders urged their flocks not to seek revenge or to retaliate against the Muslim Brotherhood. It may sound crazy to us, but they turned the other cheek.

And they lived faithfully in the far country.

Dr. Gendy said it was the time in recent history when the church gained the most converts. When the most people wanted to learn more about Christianity. When the most people saw the power of the Gospel.

And there in the far country, just as Paul said, the Egyptians got a foretaste of that time and place when

At the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
In heaven and on earth and under the earth,
And every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord.

That's what happens when we serve Jesus in the far country.