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Philippians 2:5–11, NRSVue.

⁵ *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,*
⁶ *who, though he existed in the form of God,*
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,
⁷ *but emptied himself,*
taking the form of a slave,
assuming human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a human,
⁸ *he humbled himself*
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
⁹ *Therefore God exalted him even more highly*
and gave him the name
that is above every other name,
¹⁰ *so that at the name given to Jesus*
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ *and every tongue should confess*
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Paul’s “Poem”: A Christian Creed for Today.

There are two well-known, widely recited Christian Creeds, the Apostles and the Nicene. I don’t want to spend a lot of time analyzing these two Creeds. Let’s summarize them this way. A Christian Creed is a concise, orthodox statement overviewing the shared beliefs of Christians, typically with respect to the nature

of God and Jesus, and perhaps the Holy Spirit. The Apostles Creed is the oldest of the common Christian Creeds, with its origins as a baptismal statement of faith. In its full form, it dates to approximately 400 A.D. but is based on material that dates to at least the year 200 A.D., and although it was traditionally attributed to the Apostles themselves, thus the name, we do not believe it is that old. The Nicene Creed, which is longer and has more content, was created in 325 at the Council of Nicaea. It has a unique focus on the divinity of Jesus, as it was created in large part to counter the Arianism movement, which denied that Jesus was God. Since it is shorter and more broadly used, let's look at the Apostles Creed:

*I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
the Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord: Who
was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the
Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended into hell.
The third day He arose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,
whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,*

*the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting.
Amen.*

There is a third, far less recited Creed, but one that appears directly in Scripture and is older than the Apostles and the Nicene Creeds. It appears in the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians. I was reminded of it a couple of years ago when I was visiting a patient at a hospital other than the one where I now serve as a chaplain. I was visiting someone for another pastor. This patient was an important person in a large corporation. He was highly paid and had a lot of people indirectly answering to him. He was very sick and in significant pain, and he asked me to pray with him. So, I offered a prayer of healing, and a release from pain and anxiety. Then, as patients and family members often do, he took over the prayer and offered what I at first thought were his words, but I realized sounded very formal. They were also vaguely familiar to me, although I could not place them. When he finished, he saw the expression on my face, gave me a big smile, and explained that what he had said came from Paul's letter to the followers of Christ in Philippi. I will get back to my conversation with him. We will call him Samuel. He had something very insightful to say.

There are 13 letters that are traditionally attributed to Paul in the New Testament – and Philippians is one of the 7 we are confident that he personally wrote. It is short, easy to read, and very inspiring. There is some chance that it was written over a brief period and not at one sitting, or more unlikely, that it is a merger of multiple very short letters to the believers at Philippi. Philippians tells us to be joyful no matter what happens in life, to grasp the joy that can be found by serving others, to experience the joy of simply having faith, and to discover the joy that we can find by giving to others. It is, then, a letter about joy. But it also addresses some very serious issues: the persecution of Christians, dissention among members of the church, and the need to develop a mature sense of faith. Paul states in this letter that he is in prison, but not where he is locked up. Most scholars think that he is in Rome, but others have suggested that he might have been in prison in Ephesus, largely because Ephesus was much closer to Philippi than Rome, and it would have made it much easier for him to stay in contact with the Philippi church, as letters to Rome would have spent several weeks in transit. This fits with the theory that this letter is a compendium of multiple, very short, and quickly written letters. Even the full letter is quite short.

Let's look at the letter to the Philippians as a whole. It takes up 3 or 4 pages in a typical Bible. It is, as I alluded, one of the so-called "prison letters" of Paul that

he apparently wrote while locked up. The others are Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon; we don't think he personally wrote Colossians or Ephesians. Paul had founded the church at Philippi during what we call his second missionary journey. One thing that is unique about this letter is that Paul does not do what he does in his other letters, and that is detail problems with the church he is addressing. Other than making a quick, gentle reference to two women who perhaps were not getting along that well, he isn't trying to correct any bad behaviors or non-orthodox beliefs. We believe that the letter was written around 55 A.D. and that Paul had founded the church about 5 years earlier. Philippi was an important city in northern Greece. It had been rebuilt and renamed by the father of Alexander the Great, Philip II of Macedon – thus the name Philippi – around 356 B.C. It became part of the Roman Empire by conquest in 168 B.C. Philippi was on a major Roman highway and served as an important outpost for the Roman Empire. Many retired Roman soldiers lived there. It was a fertile city with gold and silver mines nearby. Women in Macedonia served in more important roles than in other parts of Paul's world, and this was reflected in the leadership of the church in Philippi.

The apparent reason for the letter is that the church in Philippi had sent a man named Epaphroditus to Paul in his imprisonment with a gift, presumably of money. Paul thanks them and says that he is sending Epaphroditus back with the

letter that we now have. Paul offers thanks that Epaphroditus, who apparently became dangerously ill while traveling to Paul, has survived. Paul then delineates several points, and since they are somewhat unrelated, it has raised the conjecture that this is a composite letter. But the transitions between topics are not clumsy.

Rather than overview the entire letter, I will focus on the points that relate to what Samuel had to say to me. One powerful statement that Paul makes in the first chapter is that being imprisoned has not damaged his ability to spread the Word; on the contrary, he has been able to communicate freely. And the Roman guards and their officers are all aware of this guy who has been locked up because he has announced that Jesus is the Messiah. Further, his imprisonment has inspired others to have the courage to spread the faith. He reflects that if he is eventually executed then it will in truth benefit him, as he is torn between wanting to continue preaching and to be with Jesus. He is optimistic that God wants him to continue his work – so he does not think that the Romans will kill him. He tells his readers that it is a privilege to believe in Christ and to suffer because of Jesus. Remember that as a city filled with Roman soldiers and their families, Christians would be targeted for persecution. Next comes Chapter 2, which contains our Creed. Paul's main point here is that the followers of Jesus in Philippi should imitate Christ in their mindsets and their actions. They are not to be selfish or conceited but are to

be humble. Don't look after your own interests: look after the needs of others.

Next comes Paul's Creed, although he did not use this word to describe his words.

Paul's Creed is what Samuel recited from memory in his prayer that he offered as he held my hand. These words are from Philippians 2:5–11, and like Samuel, I have taken them from the NRSVue. I'll go over these words shortly and talk about their meaning, but I wanted to read this in its entirety because it is so beautiful, so poetic, and so very much a statement of core Christian beliefs.

⁵ *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,*

⁶ *who, though he existed in the form of God,*

did not regard equality with God

as something to be grasped,

⁷ *but emptied himself,*

taking the form of a slave,

assuming human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a human,

⁸ *he humbled himself*

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

⁹ *Therefore God exalted him even more highly*

and gave him the name

that is above every other name,

¹⁰ *so that at the name given to Jesus*

every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ *and every tongue should confess*

that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

First, let me note something important. The NRSVue and other translations structure these words – but not the rest of Philippians – as poetry. But these lines, verses 5 to 11, are not in poetry form in Paul’s original Greek manuscript. The ESV, for instance, leaves them in their original text-based form. The reason that translations like the NRSVue put these verses in poetry form is because they are obviously not meant to be read the same way as the surrounding text. In their original Greek they are even more unusually rhythmic than they are in our English version from the NRSVue. Further, these verses contain vocabulary that is quite unique to Paul’s writing. It is universally accepted – almost – that Paul obtained these words from some other source and inserted them in his letter because he felt that in context, they would make an important point more powerfully than his own words. Some scholars think it was an ancient Christian hymn; others think it was simply a Creed. Given Paul’s literacy and the fluency of his extensive writings, it is very significant that he would use outside words – and this is why I wanted to look at these verses carefully. Importantly, it is widely believed that Paul’s words influenced the eventual content of the poem-form Apostles and Nicene Creeds.

Let’s start with what is not in Paul’s Creed, but is in other Creeds, like the Apostles. He doesn’t talk about salvation or the virgin birth, provide details of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, mention the Holy Spirit, or dwell directly on

Jesus' atonement for our sins. Paul is more focused on demonstrating Jesus' humility than laying out the facts of his birth, life, death, and purpose. But since so much of what we proport to believe as Christians is rooted in Jesus' humility, it very much is a Creed. Here is what Paul's pseudo poem says. Jesus existed as God before he was a human, and although he was God, he chose to not hold himself up as an equal to God. Instead, he emptied himself of all pride, saw himself as a slave, and took on human form. He thus humbled himself, even taking on the obligation to do what all humans must do, and that is to die. He died on a cross. Because of this, God exalted him and gave him a name that is above all other names. This is a bit of a tricky part to interpret. We aren't sure precisely what Paul means by this "*name*". We believe that Paul is simply referring to Jesus being the Christ, the Messiah, the savior, and not to his human name, Jesus. Paul ends by saying that because of who Jesus truly is, all humans alive and dead will honor Jesus as their savior. We will all profess that he is our Lord. There is an important subtly here, that since it is rooted in history and in Jesus' place in the Roman Empire, is not as evident to us as it would be to the citizens of Philippi, living in a Roman military city. Roman Caesars were treated like gods, and some of them were literally declared to be gods, and people living

in the Roman Empire were expected to worship them. So, saying the following was a bold statement: *“every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord”*.

After Samuel recited that passage to me, he showed me where it came from in his Bible. I told him that I was impressed that he had this memorized. Then he laughed softly and told me that this was the only Bible passage he had memorized, and in fact, he had just learned it and probably would not know it in an hour. He said that he had Googled passages about humility, read several, and that this poem had caught his eye – so he had just spent the last hour memorizing it. I asked him what had got him interested in humility. He said that he had spent the last 20 years thinking of himself as a bigshot, giving orders, making big money decisions, holding himself as more important than others. Then, when he collapsed at work, the people he had seen as underlings dropped what they were doing, gathered around him, offering comfort; then they called 911, and proceeded to visit him in the hospital, bringing flowers. There were bringing meals to his family. It turned out that he had had two pulmonary embolisms. He said that he had always thought of himself as a Christian, but he realized that he had neglected one of the key commitments of every believer: to be humble.

I realize that the resurrection, the atonement, the virgin birth, the story of Pontius Pilate – all of which are standard, traditional Christian principles and are

highlighted in other Creeds - these aren't what resonate with people today. We're looking for our faith to teach us how to live happier, more satisfying, more joyous lives. And today, being humble, refusing to buy into the self-centered, commercialized, and cruel world of social media and television is one of the key ways in which we can live in both God's world and this world.

Here is one last thing to note. Most people do not consider Paul's Creed to start until the second word of verse 6:

*though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,*

That means that verse 5 is more of a prelude to the Creed:

⁵*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,*
⁶*who,*

This directs us to emulate the characteristics of Christ that Paul is about to delineate. In other words, Paul isn't simply declaring the virtues of Jesus, that he is humble, that he dedicated himself to serving others, and that he honored and obeyed God; Paul is telling us that this is how we should live. That's why Paul's poem is a Creed for today.