

## “Obedience Training”

September 28, 2008 - Philippians 2:1-13

INTRO: Today’s reading includes an early hymn which Paul inserted into his letter to the people at Philippi, to illustrate the qualities he sought to find within the Christian community. He had found the church to be marked by some self-serving behaviors. Paul didn’t scold the people, but reminded them of the events in the life of Christ, which could help define their life together.

We’re not terribly obedient people. The speed limit says 65mph and we zip along at 70mph. The Dr. says to eat lots of fruit and veggies, which we may try to do, but then on the way home, we drive through the custard stand and get the flavor of the day. We purchase a membership at the Y or an athletic club, and at first we are highly motivated to get there, but then it gets more complicated to carve out some time—to care for ourselves, and also to care for our families and coworkers who need us to be healthy. We are advised to get flu shots. “Unless we’re an infant or a healthy adult hermit, we’re told that just about everybody needs them. For the first time the CDC is proposing that children and youth get the shots unless they have a serious egg allergy, because they can get the flu from their peers at school, and then spread it to the rest of us.” (Associated Press) But still, many of us don’t get the shots.

Driving is an exercise in obedience, where we need to be driving defensively for both ours and the other persons’ benefit. The signs along Harmonie Ave., where Menomonee River Parkway and Underwood cross it, state specific hours that eastbound traffic can’t make left turns. Yet repeatedly I’ve seen drivers find a break in traffic, and even though it’s the time of day they shouldn’t be doing so, they turn anyway. The other day, heading south on Church St, to go to work, I came to the intersection of Milwaukee and Church. Someone was turning north onto Church, and it’s a one-way street right there. I hit the horn, and they glared at me, and I thought don’t get angry at me—just obey the do-not-enter sign.

As a dog owner, the word obedience means a lot to me. Both of my dogs went through obedience school. My first dog Toby, went through one round of classes and we were strongly urged by the teacher, to take round two. (And she didn’t make that suggestion because she liked my dog so much and wanted to see more of her. She knew we needed more classes.) Unfortunately, we didn’t go. With Gilly, she did great, for as much as I took the time to teach her. The commands I didn’t concentrate on, she never learned very well. And if you don’t know, obedience school is as much about teaching the owners, as it is about teaching the dogs.

It doesn’t take us long to realize that for dogs, there needs to be a good reason for them to obey us. And often, the treat is the thing. A sit, stay, lay down, is possible if some good tasting tidbit goes along with the command. I find it much more difficult to teach Gilly something, if a treat isn’t involved

If we think there’s something in it for us, obedience may be more attractive to us. I was at an all day meeting this last week, and part-way through the afternoon, they told us there were chocolate bars available at the break time. I dutifully followed their instruction and made my way into the fellowship hall, where there were baskets of chocolates. Maybe I would just take one of the bars for later. I picked one up, and on the back of the wrapper, there were even instructions—“hold here”, “lift and pull here.” Do you think I followed the instructions? Of course I did—it had been a long day and this was a real treat, just for me.

If there’s something in it for us, and we recognize that, we might even choose to follow the doctor’s orders, or our exercise trainer’s instructions, or our boss’ direction. But, if this is our understanding of obedience, then when we hear that Jesus was obedient, what was in it for him?

We are told that Christ gave up all personal ambitions, all self-seeking impulses, and surrendered himself without reserve, to the will of God. (Ernest Scott)

“The description is of Christ coming under all the conditions of the human lot, becoming a servant, obedient even to death. Christ emptied himself, served and died—without any promise of a reward.” (Fred Craddock)

“To whom was Christ obedient? The scripture doesn’t say specifically. He was presumably obedient to the laws to which he was now enslaved, which decreed that he would die and he was ultimately obedient to God. (It’s interesting, that for human beings, our downfall is our disobedience.) For Christ, his death was the result of his obedience. In his case, this death was by

crucifixion, the punishment reserved in the Roman world for rebels and disobedient slaves.” (*New Interpreter’s Bible*)

When it comes to Christ, I don’t know that we could say his obedience had something in it for him. Actually it was for us.

The Rule of Benedict speaks about obedience as something that’s lived out in a monastic setting. Joan Chittister points out that you don’t need to be in a monastery to be struggling with obedience. She says: “Most of all, obedience is lived out as the ability to hear the voice of God in one another, in the members of the community, both old and young; in the person we married and all of whose aphorisms we know by now, in old parents and boring in-laws. This voice of God in the demands of community life is not something to be dallied with or contended with or speculated about or debated. Humanity is the one place we can really be sure that God is. The self-giving of real obedience is when we follow the voice of the ones who call us to higher service, we put down our own concerns, allow ourselves to be led by the sights of another, treat our own best interests with a relaxed grasp. We empty ourselves out so that the presence of God can come in, tangible and present and divinely human.” (*The Rule of Benedict*)

Courtney Cowart barely escaped the collapsing World Trade Towers, as she fled from an adjacent building. But she returned days later to help organize a ministry in St. Paul’s Chapel, where recovery workers came to sleep and eat meals. Courtney calls that moment on the street—when she thought she would be buried alive—the defining moment of her life. “There’s this gut-level coming to terms with yourself—how well and truly did I live my life? That experience, followed by the way people served one another in the chapel—how life-giving it was to pour yourself out for one another and how that keeps your heart open—is still very much what guides Courtney today.” Since then, she has become a grass-roots proponent of “service activism” and has helped to organize thousands of volunteers working on Katrina recovery teams. (*The Christian Science Monitor*, 9-11-08)

“Obey what makes your heart more human, not necessarily what makes your position more secure. Listen with a critical ear for the sound of the gospel in everything you do. And don’t do what isn’t a gospel act, no matter who says so, no matter who orders it, no matter how sacred the institution that demands it.” (Joan Chittister)

Greg Mortenson (*Three Cups of Tea*) is the mountain climber who probably thought he was going to climb mountains for much of his life. But all of that changed, after a failed attempt to climb the K2 peak on Pakistan’s border (the world’s second highest mountain). Greg got separated from his guide. He was lost and alone and wondered how he was going to make it, when he stumbled into a remote village. The people cared for him, accepted him, he got to know them and love them. Greg soon found out that the village had no school, and made it his goal to build them one. Since then (’93), he has managed to raise money to construct 58 schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Greg came up with a kind of “one-man mission to counteract extremism & terrorism by building schools—especially for girls—throughout the territory of the Taliban.” (internet) He has done amazing work, in a region where Americans many times have been feared and hated—yet he has helped to provide schools for the children there. I believe he was able to listen for what it was that would make his heart more human, and he left behind any other thoughts about what his life was going to become, because he responded to the voice he heard.

“To be obedient is to live in a world where relinquishing one’s power is the first step in receiving a multitude of blessings.” (Gail O’Day)

The Christian faith asks something of us. We are expected to find ways to follow Christ faithfully: to be thinking of others, not just ourselves; to be obedient to his call on our lives. And, perhaps obedience isn’t this heavy, stern command on our lives, but something instead that gives us life—that even gives us joy.

Tagore, the Bengali poet said:

“I slept and dreamt that life was Joy.

I woke and saw that life was Duty.

I acted, and behold, Duty was Joy.”

Being obedient to Christ, instead of being this incredible burden, may instead give us joy, as we find that which makes our heart more human—giving of ourselves to others.

--Sue Burwell