

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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Muscle Memory

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Sometime around the year 60 CE the apostle Paul languished in prison. While under arrest for preaching Jesus is God's son and our savior, a crime punishable with death, he pens a letter to a church he helped found in a town called Philippi.

The recipients of this letter risk being persecuted for merely receiving and hearing his words. Like Paul, the Roman culture in which they live not only influence, it threatens their lives.

Although one could imagine terror seeping into the letter, yet Paul refers to "joy" and "rejoicing" sixteen times. He exudes joy.

Within the body of today's selection, Paul also includes a hymn. Scholars consider this hymn an early creed, a confession of faith, that he likely taught them and sang with them.

In the original language, the cadence and rhyme of these words might cause the recipients of the letter to sing along. Our English translation from the Greek loses that so when we hear it, we need to stretch our imaginations.

*Dear God, empty us of any distractions
and send your spirit among us.
Fill us with your words
so we embody your instructions
and together, we draw closer to your son
and belong only to you. Amen.*

Philippians 2:1-13

If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

³Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

(Here begins the text of the hymn)

⁶who, though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,

⁷but 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.

⁹Therefore God exalted him even more highly
and gave him the name
that is above every other name,

¹⁰so that at the name given to Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹and every tongue should confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

(After these two stanzas, Paul continues)

¹²Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence but much more now in my absence, work on your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Before age and injuries set in, no matter the city I found myself if traveling or the weather, I ran at least five days a week.

Before you make any assumptions, I never ran very fast or marathon-ish distances. I just ran.

One of the reasons I ran so often is that I feared skipping more than a few days would make getting back into the routine too difficult.

Most days, I laced on my shoes **and** put in my earbuds. A good playlist kept me going. The right combination of songs focused my attention, and with music playing in the background, I could work through a problem or just do an emotional reset. I ran for physical, mental, and spiritual health.

One day, for some reason, I'd forgotten my music. The last song I heard, maybe in the elevator or coming from a car on the street began to loop in my mind.

Her name was Lola. She was a show girl...

Once my mind started to play Barry Manilow's voice crooning "Copacabana" it nagged me the entire run. I tried to shake it with the scenery, street signs, anything to rid my mind of...

At the copa Copacabana
Music and passion were always the fashion

I truly apologize to those of you who will hear this song later on today in their mind or whose spouse will sing it, just to annoy you.

It became an earworm. Even that term sounds irritating. An earworm describes a song or poem or refrain that gets stuck in your mind, playing over and over.

According to a music psychologist nearly everyone, ninety percent of people, experiences an earworm at least once a week. It happens most often when the mind wanders, during what researchers call spontaneous cognition. And people can spend as much of forty percent of their day with wandering thoughts.¹

Upbeat tunes and repetitive lyrics characterize the most common earworms. Think of the song "Happy" by Pharrell Williams or one of the most popular tunes for toddlers, "Baby Shark."

¹ "Study Shows What Makes Song Earworms," *The Today Show*, <https://www.today.com/health/study-shows-what-makes-song-earworm-t104651>

Can you think of a recent time this happened to you? What was the song?

Here's the caution: an earworm may start with a catchy tune and yet it also includes ideas that intentionally or unintentionally will influence us. Will it make you happy or motivated or anxious?

Professional athletes know the importance of self-talk in practice, rest, and performance. No wonder so many trainers curate a playlist for workouts.

An old story, one to repeat rather than let it slip away, is about Orel Hershiser.

Nicknamed "Bulldog," he pitched 63 consecutive scoreless innings and was named MVP multiple times for the LA Dodgers when they won the National League Championship and World Series in 1988.

This darling of baseball frequented the interview circuit. On a late-night talk show, when asked how he stayed so calm and steady with 50,000 screaming fans in person and millions on TV Hershiser replied, "I sing a hymn."

What he puts into his mind, repeats over and over could either keep him calm, or let the anxiety of the moment destabilize him.

Hershiser continued, "I'm a Presbyterian and I sing a hymn to myself that we sing in church all the time."

Then he stood and sang on network TV, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.” He sang our Doxology. “Doxology” means giving praise to God.

After seeing this YouTube clip, anytime I watch a baseball player in the outfield when bases are loaded or a golfer approach the green for the prize-winning putt, I wonder what goes through their minds. Then I think of Hershiser, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.”

During times of stress, when anxiety reaches a fever pitch, or when the noise of the outside world wants to erase all of what you believe true, become the moments when the words we repeat either send us spiraling downward or save us.

Paul knows this. We read it in his letter from centuries ago.

Sitting in the horrors of prison, possibly haunted by the sounds of other prisoners tortured, or chains scraping across the floor, or being browbeaten into speaking allegiance to Rome and Caesar, Paul writes to remind himself to whom he belongs and how he will endure.

The hymn he turns to must have been an earworm, one of the good ones. Consider this a Doxology to praise God for salvation offered to us through Jesus.

The portion of the hymn Paul includes begins with Jesus, who though he lived a human life, could also claim equality with

God. Omnipotent, all powerful, able to shake the earth and rain fire upon enemies.

Jesus could but did not claim equality with God. He chose not to, because that is not God's nature. All of God's creative acts, blessings, and delights in creation are for others goodness. God gives. God's essence is self-giving.

Jesus emptied himself. He gave all of himself to live our human lot, even to death on the cross, in obedience with God.

After what people was believed the worst, most humiliating end, God raises Christ. God reveals that love always overcomes hate. God's love always wins.

Alongside this hymn Paul reminds the people of Philippi to let the same mind, the same attitude of Christ Jesus dwell within. To let Christ, not self-interests, be the goal. To let Christ, not Caesar, be the goal.

To accomplish this, Paul calls for a radical ideal -- humility.

At the time, Ancient Mediterranean cultures pursued honor and avoided shame at all costs. Any call to be humble defied everything those Philippians would have known. Honor was proof of merit, shame the proof of worthlessness. (How frightening it seems our common culture seems to have degenerated to the same ethos.)

So what does this say about the crucified Jesus? That is the question confronting the early Christians. Logically they had

two options: either Jesus was not as great as they had first thought, his humiliating crucifixion evidence of his insignificance, or through Jesus, God redefines the notion of “greatness.”

In God’s eyes, the noble choice is to think of others, as Jesus taught, to love others, as Jesus did, to include those without status or privilege.²

This call to humility does not ask you to belittle who you are, it calls you to understand your life as sheer gift from God. Be who God created you to be. Let God continue in creating you, within you.

Humility calls us to give rather than take. Humility not only signals security: it fosters it, too.³

At a time when Paul and the people of Philippi may have wondered if devotion to Christ were for naught, he calls for the marginalized and powerless, the proud and the privileged, to **not** fear humility, but to welcome the counterintuitive grace of God to be unleashed through their community.

To live humbly is exactly what holding the mind of Christ looks like.

² William Greenway, “Philippians 2:1-13, Theological Perspectives,” *Feasting on the Word, Year A*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008) 112.

³ John Dickson, *Humilitas: A Lost Key to Life, Love and Leadership*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011) 24, 106.

It was hard back then and remains a challenge today.

We remain bombarded with competing notions to achieve excellence, rank ourselves. Or to align with an alluring personality or group that will empower us. Or to aspire to some value system that elevates us at the expense of others. All these eventually pit us against one another and Jesus.

The call to be a follower of Christ comes to us as individuals and invites us to belong to one another through a community of faith, a church. It's never a one-time event. Never a solo act.

Just like any exercise our bodies, we devote ourselves to faith day-by-day and week-by-week. Coming together as a community.

We recite the same creeds as those early followers: "I believe in the God the Father almighty." We pray the same prayers, "Our Father, who art in heaven...forgive us our debts as we forgive others."

The habits we acquire, the words we repeat, the rituals we celebrate instill within us the muscle memory to hold to Jesus' authority, particularly in times of brutality.

We hand out Bibles and encourage our little ones to learn the Twenty-third Psalm so that they the grasp an ancient faith and God guide them to still waters. We teach them the Ten Commandments, the ten best ways to live for God and

community. Putting these words into action becomes the building blocks for an enduring community.

When we put these ideas into our minds, we never lose sight of who gives us and saves our lives.

I hope you claim a hymn, a psalter, a prayer, some Jesus-y words that anchors you in him. I hope when you feel defeated, you let these words and practices of faith center you. Give yourself to him. Let his mind dwell in you. I hope you know that church, this community of people, is the place to go when you've been named MVP or an equivalent in your mind and you praise God. I hope you surround yourself with these same people when you feel ground into defeat. This is the place to be loved. To belong. You need one another and Jesus. I hope you find a way to put into your mind and muscle memory the belief and behavior that you belong to God.



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