

Feast of the Holy Name

January 1, 2023

Numbers 6:22-27

Philippians 2:5-11

Luke 2:15-21

Psalm 8

The Rev. Nat Johnson

According to the Church calendar year, today is the Feast of the Holy Name, the day we commemorate and celebrate the naming of Jesus; the name, Paul tells us, at which all knees shall bend and every tongue confess as Lord. Though we celebrate this feast every year on January 1st, I suspect most people associate this date with New Year's Day. And for many it began with festive celebrations including fireworks, friends, parties, and general merriment as we marked the passing of one year into another. Culturally, this is a time we tend to reflect on the year gone by, to celebrate our accomplishments, to remember all that was life-filled and joyful, to recall life-milestones passed, to mourn those we've lost, to take stock of where and who we are. This reflection often includes an evaluation of life and resolve to live more fully into the kind of life one's beliefs and convictions compel them to embody. Resolutions range from our health and how we want to look and feel, to changing habits that determine where we spend our time, money, and energy, to bucket-list goals we want to check off.

Like most things in the dominant culture, New Year's resolutions tend to be individualistic, aimed in some way or another toward self-improvement. But I wonder what it might look like for us think about resolutions in the context of parish life: in the ways that we gather, that we care for one another, that we intentionally live into the name "Christian." What if the basis of our evaluation of the previous year was less about our own personal ideals of health, wealth, and success, and more about the pattern of the common life that we share as *this* particular, local expression of the Body of Christ?

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul implores the community to order their common life in a manner worthy of the Gospel, resolving to live in unity with one another by striving side by side for the faith of the gospel and being courageous in the face of intimidation and opposition. This kind of unity requires humility, doing nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit but always looking to the interests and concerns of others. A life worthy of the gospel is a life patterned after Jesus' own life. Using an early Christian hymn, Paul exhorts his hearers to "let the same mind be in you as was in Christ." He goes on to explain that the very pattern of humility he encourages in the Philippian community is embodied in Jesus' refusal to exploit his divine privilege. Rather than holding onto his privilege and using it for selfish ambition, he uses the freedom of that divine privilege in an ultimate act of solidarity with humanity.

In a sense, since the beginning of creation, God has refused to be God without us. As creatures of God, we have always been inextricably bound to, and constituted by, God. But something significant happened in the incarnation, in the moment that the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and caused her to conceive. The union of divine and human that happened in Mary's womb was God's ultimate yes to humanity, the manifestation of the height of God's desire to invite us into the divine life.

Paul sees humility as the foundation of obedience in Jesus' life. Jesus remained steadfast in his purpose, faithful to his mission, and this led him to suffering and to death on a cross. But this path is also what led to his exaltation, to being exalted to the highest place and to being given the name that is

above all names. In other words, God vindicated all that Jesus was, did, and taught. We ought to be cautious in defining this kind of vindication as either divine punishment or reward. Instead, Paul is suggesting that divine vindication is rooted in justice, setting before the Philippians (and us) the assurance that “being of the same mind as was in Christ” unites us not only with the sufferings of Christ but also binds us to Christ’s glorification.

So what does all of this mean for us today, in our particular parish and our particular community? The implications of this passage for us today confront us in the various contexts we inhabit. As a parish, a body of believers who are striving for the good of the faith, the pattern that Philippians 2:5-11 gives us, should challenge us in our interactions with one another. It provides the dispositions required to effectively care for and minister to each other. It shows us the kind of relational conditions necessary for being more than an aggregate of likeminded individuals, affecting the way we live our common life and the way we strive together for the good of the faith. It shows us that being of one mind is not about the flattening of differences of opinions or perspectives, but of choosing our commitment to the goal of living a life worthy of the gospel as the most important commonality among us. When Paul tells the Philippians to regard others as better than themselves, he is calling for what biblical scholar Gerald Hawthorne calls a “total inward attitude of mind or disposition of will that strives after that one thing that is greater than any human truth, a spirit of unity and sentiment in which powerful tensions are held together by an overmastering loyalty to each other as [siblings] in Christ.”

In the broader context of our community, this passage challenges us in other ways. Jesus’ refusal to exploit his privilege speaks a clear warning to people of privilege in our society about what it means to exist in the relational spectrum of oppression. People of privilege are exempt from feeling the urgency of injustice because we simply do not experience the conditions that prompt that urgency:

- white people can easily ignore societal and institutional forms of racism and violence that are so prevalent in our civic structures, because we do not experience the imbalances of injustice and marginalization.
- Men can easily ignore the misogyny and patriarchy in the societal expectations of women because they do not have to fight against them.
- Heterosexuals can ignore the dehumanizing policies and social stigma heaped onto the LGBTQ community because the rights they take for granted are already theirs.
- Those in the upper classes of society can ignore the plight of the poor because we take security for granted

The word that Paul uses to tell his readers that they ought to consider or regard others as better than themselves connotes “concentration.” This verb suggests that effort is required on the part of the privileged to “see the concerns or interests” of others. In our social context, this means that as a parish of predominantly privileged people, our humility and obedience ought to lead also to our desire and willingness to look to minority communities, listen to the voices of the oppressed, and allow them to teach and lead us in our work toward justice.

In a blog post from several years ago called, “How to be Last: A Practical Theology for Privileged People,” Christena Cleveland underscores the significance of equity in our pursuit of a just world. She suggests that people of privilege often blend the distinction between equity and equality. Equality requires little of us in terms of emptying ourselves of privilege. We are uncomfortable with notions of reversal, of the mighty being brought down and the rich sent away empty while the lowly are lifted up and the hungry are filled with good things. In dominant culture, we’re much more comfortable – at least theoretically – with a “round table at which everyone has an equal seat and voice.”

But Cleveland recognizes something different in the pattern of life we find in Jesus. She explains that Jesus' example of humility and self-emptying indicates that our notions of equality are not, in fact, "drastic enough" to create the kind of mutuality, kinship, and same-mindedness that Paul is setting before the Philippians. Equality, from this perspective, doesn't go far enough to dismantle the existing social hierarchy. She goes on to say, "We experience the kin-dom of heaven when we aim for equity... when the first are last and the last are first... when people from oppressed groups lead and people from privileged groups follow... when people from oppressed groups are given opportunities and rights that people from privileged groups have long taken for granted... when the discourse, narratives and strategies are primarily informed by the people" who have been historically underprivileged rather than those whose privilege blinds them to the struggles and suffering of the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed.

Today, as we celebrate the coming of a new year and as we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus, we are invited to a new kind of resolution of unity, a unity that is wrought not by affinity or sameness, but a unity of heart wrought by the power of the Holy Spirit as we strive alongside one another for the faith of the gospel. May God give us the strength and perseverance to resolve to live humbly in true community with one another, to remain obedient to the Spirit that unites us, and to strive toward a common life that is worthy of the Gospel in our work toward an equitable and just world.