A Sermon for DaySpring

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*“Belly Worship”*

Philippians 3:17-4:1

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The New Testament letter from Paul to the Philippians is probably the warmest, most affectionate, lovingly-penned epistle we have. In it, St. Paul expresses his appreciation for the people of the church of Philippi, congratulates them on their faithful partnership in the gospel, assures them of his devotion and prayers for them, and gives thanks for them and for their gifts to him since he’s been in prison in Rome. Paul loves these people and thinks of them fondly.

It’s in that context that he warns them and all Christians to beware of those who live as ‘enemies of the cross of Christ.’ This is third warning like this in this little letter. Whoever these people are, these ‘enemies of the cross of Christ’, this is serious business for Paul. He seems to think that the Philippian Christians are in some danger from these people. “I have often told you about them and I’m telling you now even with tears.” Well, who is he talking about?

For many people the answer would be abundantly clear and obvious. Enemies of the cross are self-declared enemies of the cross, right? They do things that demonstrate their enmity towards the cross and towards Christians. They do things like take prayer out of schools, dislodge monuments to the 10 commandments, and declare themselves, like militant Islamists, to battle against the church. “For many live as enemies of the cross.” Obviously, we know who they are.

But that doesn’t fit the Philippian letter at all. Nowhere in the letter are ‘enemies of the cross’ anti-Christians who want to tear the church down from the outside, threaten her safety, or take away her privileged place in society. Paul, who suffered greatly at the hands of people who wanted to silence his message, never refers to them as enemies of the cross. Not the Ephesian capitalists who accused Paul of undermining their trinket making businesses by preaching against idol worship. Not the Athenian intellectuals who questioned him about his doctrine and never came around to Christian faith. Not Roman soldiers who arrested him, not Felix or Agrippa who interrogated him. Not even Caesar who would decide his fate and have him put to death. Outsiders to the faith were not enemies, they were people God loved and wanted to reach with the grace of Christ. They were those to whom Paul was sent as friend, missionary, preacher, and to whom Christ was sent as messiah and for whom he died.

It looks like enemies of the cross, then, were people within the church or at least within the church’s orbit whose teaching about Jesus had a way of minimizing the cross. According to Paul, *their god is their belly, their shame is their glory*. That sounds like they liked to indulge freely and probably preached a gospel of self-indulgence. Whoever these people were with their bellies and their shames, they could probably use some Lent: Lenten disciplines are usually aimed at our human tendencies to make eating, drinking, and other activities of the body more important than faith. In Lent, spiritual renewal comes through denying ourselves certain pleasures in order to bring everything in our lives in subjection to Christ. A little fasting, a little silence, confession of sin, giving more generously . . .all help us remember our Lord in his suffering. In these disciplines we take baby steps toward not letting our bellies become our gods, which is what our bellies want to become if we let them get control over us. So, we discipline ourselves. If Christ fasted for a long time in the wilderness, we follow his example to embrace some temporary displeasure.

Yes, it seems, belly-worshippers could use a little Lent. Their gods are their bellies. It’s not hard at all to imagine what it looks like for our appetites in general, even our bellies in particular to have god-like sway over us. Truth is we probably know far too well. No one actively thinks they are worshipping their bellies, but when your life is controlled by satisfying your desires whenever they come and whatever they are, then you have found your god—your belly, your desire, your comfort, whatever.

Let’s admit, it’s quite easy to kneel at this altar. We’re a nation whose motto should be changed from “In God we Trust” to “In buffets we trust”. But it’s bigger than food; it’s about how we satisfy all of our appetites. Having your belly as your god isn’t a matter of how much you eat; it’s about serving yourself and your felt needs whenever and however you want. And you can do that easily. We all can. Not just with food, with anything: drive thru, swipe right, tweet my anger, click my order, get easy cash. It’s all right there, all the time, any time you want it. We’ve come to a place where to not satisfy our craving for something is considered weirdly and unnecessarily quaint.

This is where freedom has brought us. We can have just about anything we want, anytime we want it, as much as we want, and don’t hardly know how to tell the difference between what we want and what we need, or what we want in the moment and what is good for us in the end, and what we want and what we should want. And we definitely can’t let anyone else tell us how to know the difference. It’s hard to live as free people. It’s a kind of prison. Few set out to fall in the vortex of perpetual self-serving worship, but it’s actually hard for it not to be anymore, to be a person whose passions and desires do not control their actions. We’re a people all about the satisfaction of appetites and desires.

This is one of the gifts of penitential seasons Lent and Advent. Christians have the opportunity, in solidarity with one another and with the encouragement of one another, to practice and remember what it means for God to be God by denying the power of other gods over our lives. To help us do this we have one another and the liturgies and prayers of the season; we have the examples of the saints and the apostles. And we have Christ, who not only fasted in the desert, but whose whole life was a descent of humility and service, denying the easy way for the hard way, he who risked everything big for ultimate good.

In all the New Testament, Philippians gives us the most beautiful picture of Christ, “who was in the form of God, but did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being found in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” Paul calls us to have this same mind, this humbleness about our lives and our personal needs to imitate Christ and those who are faithful in this journey of taking our minds off of earthly things and keeping them on Christ.

Humility is a big word for Paul in Philippians. It’s almost as if Paul brags about his humility. Almost, not quite. But . . .almost. It might be a little off-putting if the kind of humility Paul is preaching were self-serving, but it’s not. Paul’s in prison. He doesn’t know how much longer he will live. He’s sacrificed everything . . .everything for Christ and for Christ’s Church. And now he wants to be sure his beloved friends don’t lose the way, the truth, and the life of faith in Christ. I love you, I care for you, now be careful.

Three times in this letter Paul warns them, with increasing intensity, about some people who are preaching a different kind of gospel than he did. In chapter 1, he says they are proclaiming Christ out of selfish ambition, envy, and rivalry. It seems that there are some who want to take advantage of Paul’s imprisonment by teaching a form of Christianity that doesn’t include suffering or pain or sacrifice. They are preaching Christ in a way that won’t get them in trouble with Roman authorities, encouraging the Philippian Christians to follow a religion that will keep them from Paul’s fate. Paul reminds them, gently but lovingly, in this letter, that if you’re going to follow Christ, you need to be prepared to take up your cross, somehow, somewhere. That’s the first warning: do not listen to Christian teaching that avoids suffering. That is not the way of Jesus.

Later, he gives a second warning about dangers from a different direction. “Watch out for the dogs, look out for the evil doers, those who mutilate the flesh.” Here he’s warning them about those who insist that every gentile convert should be circumcised. Paul’s already fought that theological battle, but the skirmishes won’t go away. Here he’s contending with it again, and says, “Look, if you want to find someone who’s kept all the Torah laws, I’m him. I’ve been it all, I’ve done it all. And I’m telling you, my righteousness is not through the law, it’s through faith in Christ, righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and that I may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

Well, it seems our bellies can become god-like not just by filling them but by obsessing over them. Not just indulging them but watching every calorie, tracking every step, obsessing over every pound. In a way, it’s exactly the opposite from gluttony; in another way, it’s exactly the same. We don’t see our bodies as gifts but as burdens; and we lose our way in knowing how to live well in our bodies with delight and discipline and purpose. Religion can mimic either or both of these fallacies: to either promote the idea that our bodies don’t matter and so do whatever you want as a kind of false freedom; or religion can go the other way and legislate itself to death by its rules, restrictions, and requirements. Jesus finally got so frustrated with religious leaders bent like this, policing all kinds of religious rules, he had to remind them: the sabbath was made for people, not people for the sabbath.

These people who threaten the community from the other side could use a little Lent, too. Lent is not just a disciplining of our bodies through fasting, it’s a renewal of our faith in the sufficiency of the cross for our sins and for our salvation. We can’t add to what Christ has done for us. It’s enough. It’s finished. In Christ, you are set free. In him, you are saved.

That’s the second warning: do not listen to teaching that piles on requirements that denies the saving grace that comes by faith in Christ. That also is not the way of the cross. St Paul understood that this little community of Christians he loved very much faced two very different kinds of threats. One preached a way that avoided the cross by promising cheap grace. The other preached a way that nullified the cross by putting law over grace. It looks to me like Paul is dealing with the 1st century versions of the ditches on both sides of the road. In either ditch, our minds are set on earthly things.

And then we come back to the third warning: enemies of the cross, whose god is their bellies and whose glory is their shame. And it applies to both kinds of trouble. It echoes the first warning, beware of Christian teaching that avoids suffering and sacrifice. To have your belly as your god can be lived by satisfying all the urges and cravings you have. The cross teaches us that life is not just about satisfying our appetites, and faith is never just about being comfortable.

It echoes the second warning about requirements that deny grace. To have the belly as your god can also be lived with outsized focus on bodies, yours and other people, that it becomes an obsession and so takes the place of God in a different, but just as dangerous, way. The cross teaches us that trust in Christ is sufficient for our salvation, which is a free gift of grace offered to all people.

What this likely means for us is that the enemy of Christ isn’t way over there on the other side of the world; it’s not on the other side of the aisle. That which is at enmity with Christ is within us. The line between church and world runs through the middle of each of us as does the line between saint and sinner, Pharisee and publican, prodigal son and older brother, death and life. The line runs through us all. What are we to do?

Remember our citizenship is in heaven, which doesn’t mean an otherworldly denial of this life waiting impatiently for the day to come to leave this earth. It means remembering what it most important in this life. What is most important about you is that you belong to Christ, and that your salvation comes through faith in him as the Son of God, raised from the dead. Because you have this faith, you can have his mind in you, he who left the glory of heaven to take the form of a servant, even unto death on a cross. Not despite this cosmic descent, but because of it, not in spite of the ways he denied his own body and was willing to suffer, but because of it; not in spite of his denial of his own good for the good of others, but because of it, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, even yours. His name is above every name, even your name.

At the name of Jesus every knee bows, in heaven and on earth, and under the earth. Every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father. This is our hope and our prayer.

To bend the knee may mean we need to bring control to our passions and discipline to our hungers. And it may mean to lighten the burden you place on yourself and others. Instead throw some of those logs on the sacred fire and let it burn.

Remember:

You are not God.

You are not god.

You are not God and you will not become God no matter what you do or don’t do.

You are loved by Christ, and that will not change no matter what you do or don’t do.

You are called by Christ to a higher and holier life in everything you do and everything you don’t do.

May it all be, always and only, for the glory of God in Christ, whose cross is our true freedom and our salvation.