

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta

“Someone Stronger than the Me Monster” (Philippians 2:3-11)

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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Many years ago I read a wonderful book by pastor and leadership guru John Maxwell entitled *Failing Forward* (2000). My favorite chapter in this book is the ninth one, “Get over Yourself—Everyone Else Has”, in which he observes:

If you continually focus all your energy and attention on yourself, I have a message for you: *Get over yourself—everyone else has*. If you dedicate most of your time and energy to looking out for number one, you may need to learn a new way of thinking—where others come first (100).

This “new way of thinking—where others come first” is exactly what we see in today’s beautiful passage from Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. Paul planted the church at Philippi, the very first Christian church in Europe, during his second missionary journey (Acts 16). This church began with a women’s prayer group led by a wealthy woman named Lydia, and continued with Paul performing an exorcism and then being thrown in prison. That night in prison Paul and his missionary companion Silas were chained to a wall, praying and singing hymns, when as the writer of Acts put it, “Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened” (Acts 16:26). The jailor panicked and was going to take his own life, but Paul stopped him and later that morning baptized him and his family. The church at Philippi had a remarkable beginning.

Years later while imprisoned in Rome, Paul wrote his Letter to the Philippians, many of whom apparently were completely self-absorbed and needed to “learn a new way of thinking—where others come first.” Along these lines, in today’s passage Paul exhorts the Philippians, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4). This is not just a tall order, but well-nigh impossible.

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit...regard others better than yourselves”—this completely cuts against the grain of human nature. As human beings we are naturally self-centered, self-absorbed, solipsistic, the center of our own little universe. Saint Augustine used a Latin phrase to describe this, *incurvatus in se*, which means “curved inward on oneself.” In other words, we are hardwired to look at everything through the lens of ourselves—what’s in it for me? How does this benefit me? What will I get out of this?

Many of us know people who if they are in the room, they absolutely have to be the center of attention, and if they are not, they are simply not interested—people comedian Brian Regan famously refers to as the “Me Monster.” Unfortunately sometimes all we have to do is look in the mirror to see a Me Monster, alive and well, looking back at us.

Many years ago when I was a newlywed and a senior in college, wondering what I was going to do after graduation, I attended an early-morning prayer meeting at a local Episcopal Church. Afterwards in the parking lot one of the other attendees, a middle aged man in a fine suit, struck up a conversation with me. Initially he seemed genuinely interested in me—asking me about my life. But then he walked me over to his BMW, popped open the trunk, and began showing me various high end, pricey body care products—lotions, shampoos, soaps—and tried to recruit me to be part of a pyramid scheme. I did my best to be polite as I declined, and as I drove back to our apartment afterwards I thought, “That was really weird.”

I had gone to church to pray, and perhaps get some clarity on what I was supposed to do next in my life. I just wasn’t prepared to experience the joy and excitement of body care products. Someone who I initially thought was putting my interests first did the exact opposite. I am sure many of you have had similar experiences—perhaps sans the body care products. And if we’re honest, at one time or another each of us has metaphorically been the one hawking body care products, looking out for our own interests instead of the interests of others. Again, we are hardwired to do that, so we need that new way of thinking where others come first.

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,” Paul wrote, “but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” What does this look like?

Recently a Spanish triathlete named Diego Mentrída literally showed what it looks like to put the interests of others first. Near the end of the Santander Triathlon, Diego was in fourth place behind British triathlete James Teagle. Near the end of the race Teagle missed a turn and careened into some barriers, allowing Diego to pass him. But before the finish line, Diego did something no one expected: he stopped and waited for his opponent. When Teagle arrived, Diego shook his hand and beckoned him to go cross the finish line first. Who does that? After the race Diego said, “When I saw that he had missed the route, I just stopped. James deserved this medal.” He later posted on Instagram, “This is something my parents and my club have taught me since I was a child. It should be considered normal.”

Imagine a world in which that kind of putting others first would be considered normal. And yet in today’s passage Paul points to a much greater example of putting others first, in fact the greatest example in the history of the world:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross (Philippians 2:5-8).

Jesus Christ, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, the Alpha and Omega, the Son of God became a human being, born as a helpless infant, and not born in a palace but in a barn. And throughout his earthly life, over and over and over again, Jesus considered others better than himself and put the interests of others first. Jesus’ earthly life and ministry was never about him, ever. Even at the Last Supper, the night before his unimaginable death, Jesus took the form of a servant, washing the feet of the very disciples who hours later would forsake him and run away. Jesus never stopped putting the interests of others first.

And the next day Jesus considered the world, including you, better than himself and put the interests of the world, including yours, before his own. As a humble servant just as Paul wrote Jesus indeed “became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” Who does that? Your Savior does. That is the ultimate example of putting the interests of others first.

And how did God the Father respond? As Paul put it:

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

And how does God call us to respond? By following Jesus' example: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

One more illustration and then I'll close...last week was Bruce Springsteen's birthday, so here is an illustration from the Boss. On his 1992 album *Lucky Town*, which was shredded by critics but still had some great songs, Springsteen included a song about putting others' interests before one's own especially in the context of a relationship, a gentle ballad called "If I Should Fall Behind":

We said we'd walk together baby come what may
That come the twilight should we lose our way
If as we're walking a hand should slip free
I'll wait for you and should I fall behind wait for me...
So let's make our steps clear that the other may see
And I'll wait for you and if I should fall behind wait for me

In this particularly stressful time as we navigate a pandemic, social unrest, and the most polarizing election season in decades, the Me Monster in all of us has reared its ugly head, the Me Monster that never gets over itself, the Me Monster that always puts itself first, the Me Monster that is perpetually curved inward on itself. And right now we do not need a pyramid scheme, or any other scheme in which we consider ourselves better than others and put our own interests before the interests of others...we need the gospel of God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ.

You see, when John Maxwell wrote, "get over yourself—everyone else has" he was mostly right, but not totally right. Because there is Someone infinitely stronger than any Me Monster, Someone who will always stop at the finish line when you take a wrong turn, Someone who will not only wait for you should you fall behind but will backtrack to meet you right where you are.

And through the power of the Holy Spirit this Someone can transform all of us from being Me Monsters curved in our ourselves to being a little more like Jesus, curved outward toward others, considering others better than ourselves, putting other's interests before our own.

Because even if everyone else has gotten over you, this Someone, your humble Savior Jesus Christ, has never gotten over you...and never will.

Amen.