

Be Thou My Vision  
Philippians 2:1-11

November 12, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
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This is Veterans Day weekend, as you know. My son Weldon is a marine, no longer in active service, but he tells me “Once a Marine, always a Marine.” Every year he reminds me and all his Facebook friends that Memorial Day in May is for those who died in the service to our nation, and Veterans Day in November is for folks like him, who joined up, did their duty, and lived to tell stories about it. Weldon is 47 years old now, and he lives in Sri Lanka where his wife is a foreign service officer, stationed at the embassy there. That is another form of service, to uproot one’s life every two or three years to be sent somewhere else around the globe to represent the nation. Still, Weldon goes to the Veterans of Foreign Wars chapter wherever they are stationed, and he goes to the Marine Corps Ball every year. He continues to identify in some way with that time in his life, now more than 20 years ago, when he wore the uniform.

Every service member’s story is different, yet in one way they are all the same. They all include a cost – sometimes a heavy cost – sometimes the ultimate cost. Every person who puts on the uniform of our nation pours something of themselves out, gives something of themselves up, in order to take on the mantle of citizenship. They write a blank check, payable up to and including their lives, and even when they survive, the person they are when they muster out is not exactly the same as the green recruit they were before. That sort of selfless service changes us. We owe everyone who has served our thanks.

Now, I don’t want to confuse the life of Christ with the life of a marine. God’s purposes and the military purposes of our nation are not the same thing. Still, this pouring out of oneself in service to a higher cause is exactly what St. Paul describes when he talks about the Incarnation. Paul, writing from prison, says, “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

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

but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a servant,  
assuming human likeness.

And, being found in appearance as a human,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death –  
even death on a cross.

Paul is stating his own situation here. He is imprisoned, either in Caesarea or in Rome, and he faces the very real possibility of death. In fact, he was martyred in Rome in about 64 AD under Emperor Nero. Here, Paul is writing to his beloved friends in Philippi, advising them to be humble and selfless servants, and to be obedient – as Christ was obedient, as Paul is obedient – even to the point of death. And he says they can do this if they think as Christ thought. If they love and serve as Christ did. If they fill themselves with the Spirit of Christ, then they will naturally know what to do.

This admonition is not only for the Philippians, of course. It is for us as well. And Paul is asking a lot of us, who live in a time when it is safe to be a Christian. In this beautiful hymn, Paul challenges us to be so filled with the Spirit of Christ, so inspired by his life and death and resurrection that we will naturally put others' needs ahead of our own; that we will pour ourselves out in selfless, Christlike service; that we will be willing even to die, if need be, for another. To believe in the resurrected Christ is to sign a blank check, payable up to and including our lives. To know the resurrected Christ is to be changed by his example. We cannot enter into Christian life and be the same as we were before, any more than a military veteran can be unchanged by their time in service.

We sang a moment ago, "Be thou my vision." Let us see the world with God's eyes. "Be thou my wisdom." Let us discern truth as God does. We sang God is "my treasure." Let us set our hearts on God and God alone. God is the "bright heaven's Sun," we sang. Let us be guided always by the light of God's love. For if we let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus – if we think as Christ thought – then we will naturally love and serve as Christ did.

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart.  
Nought be all else to me, save that thou art.  
Thou my best thought by day or by night,  
Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Amen