

## Sacred Humility

By Rev Todd Farnsworth

Philippians 2: 1-11



*Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, **2** then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. **3** Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, **4** not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. **5** In your relationships with one another have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: **6** Who, being in very nature[a] God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; **7** rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature[b] of a servant, being made in human likeness. **8** And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! **9** Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, **10** that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, **11** and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

On this Memorial Day weekend, we join with Americans across our nation in remembering the profound sacrifices made by military families. We especially consider those Gold Star families who have had a loved one die during their time of service to our country.

One of the earliest commemorations of those who died in service was organized by recently freed African Americans. According to History.com, *“as the Civil War neared its end, thousands of Union soldiers, held as prisoners of war, were herded into a series of hastily assembled camps in Charleston, South Carolina. Conditions at one camp, a former racetrack near the city’s Citadel, were so bad that more than 250 prisoners died from disease or exposure, and were buried in a mass grave behind the track’s grandstand. Three weeks after the Confederate surrender, an unusual procession entered the former camp: On May 1, 1865, more than 1,000 people recently freed from enslavement, accompanied by regiments of the U.S. Colored Troops (including the Massachusetts 54th Infantry) and a handful of white Charlestonians, gathered in the camp to consecrate a new, proper burial site for the Union dead. The group sang hymns, gave readings, and distributed flowers around the cemetery, which they dedicated to the “Martyrs of the Race Course.”*

Tomorrow, at noon, the members of the American Legion here in Briarcliff will gather with the community in Law Park, to likewise recall the martyrs of our community. There will be a short parade, some readings, and flowers dedicated to the sacred humility of those who put their lives on the line for the sake of our country.

Writing from prison, Paul described the kind of sacrifice we honor. It is a selfless sacrifice that looks to a common good beyond the needs of self. He

wrote: *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.* According to the commentaries, in this letter, Paul is particularly concerned that the Christian community distinguishes itself “from the legalists and libertines of Phillipi”. He can see the danger in following the law too closely or living for oneself and exhorts his readers to avoid those behaviors. He gives them a different path that is centered in Christ. It is a path that we would do well to jump onto as a community of faith and as a nation that touts itself as “faithful.”

Besides the parades and services being held for those who died in service to our country as part of our military, there will be other gatherings this week, for other martyrs. There will be services for those slaughtered in Buffalo. There will be services for the children murdered in TX. And in the wake of these shootings, America’s leaders will wring their hands and lament the senseless sacrifices made to the real god of our country, guns. Like a golden calf before it, the needs of individuals to feel good and safe and strong will outweigh the humbling of self for the sake of God’s safety and strength. The need to make money on the sales of guns and ammo will outweigh the cost of a child’s unfulfilled life; the span of a young adult’s dreams. There will be little talk of sacrifice. There will instead be despair and blame and bad ideas that put more of our little deity into circulation.

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As I listened for solutions to this epidemic of destruction I learned a LOT about the people who commit these heinous crimes.

- I learned that most mass killings are committed by someone who has an unresolved childhood trauma. If you are wondering if you know any children with trauma, this morning's NYT article indicates you probably do! [362 School Counselors on the Pandemic's Effect on Children:](#) noted that 94% of our children are showing signs of anxiety and depression, and 88% showing an inability to regulate their emotional responses. <https://nyti.ms/3t5zABj>
- I learned that the killers are not monsters, but children and neighbors who are looking for scapegoats for their anger.
- I learned that the people committing these crimes reach a point where they don't care if they live or die, and seek a sort of selfish fame from the crime they go on to commit. They want to be remembered.
- I learned that their act of murder is a kind of suicide. A death of despair that they enter into without an escape plan. –[Violence Project interview on WNYC](#)

I also learned about the many ways in which we can make sacrifices to prevent these crimes from happening with the high frequency they are occurring today in America.

- We can sacrifice our guns. Gun buy-back programs and making guns less accessible has been empirically shown to reduce mass murders.
- We can safely store the guns we have in our homes by locking them in secure cabinets. Hidden guns are found...and used with tragic frequency.
- We can pay attention to “leakage” by those who are planning a mass shooting. Many people around us are in crisis right now due to the effects of isolation during the pandemic. 44-55% of mass shooters leak their plans on social media to friends and acquaintances. If you see or hear someone talking about a plan, report it to the police or local mental health services. Keep reporting until you see results of someone taking action. Equip our schools with [Say Something](#) tip lines that allow people to anonymously raise a flag of concern.
- Invest in data-driven, evidence based solutions and work together as a community to implement these solutions for the welfare of one another. –[Katelyn Jetalina, epidemiologist](#)

Like the Philippians before us, there are legalists and libertines who will seek to make these observations into political discord. They will look for some loophole to assert their “rights” and maintain the status quo of fealty to the lesser god of guns.

Like the Philippians before us, we are encouraged to assume a position of sacred humility for the sake of our neighbors. Paul notes that unlike the common Greco-Roman understanding of “humility” as something to be *despised*, for Christians, to imitate Christ’s humble posture is *a virtue*. It is akin to the relationship described in the Old Testament between people and God. People bowed to God with respect. So too, this humility will require us

to bow to some of our selfish beliefs and practices. It will also require us to take on some things, like paying closer attention to the people in our community who may be in crisis and moving toward them in Christian love so that they know that they are seen, valued, and cared about. These past two years have made us a little rusty in that aspect of community. We have out of necessity, been hunkered down behind screens, afraid of each other. Afraid of a virus. But it is summer in NY. We are vaccinated. We wear masks. We can keep some social distance from those who cannot be vaccinated. We can be outdoors and we can be with one another safely and we can be a society of sacrifice, rather than a state of selfishness. With our hearts and minds on Jesus' sacrifices, we can model a different way of living and help to prevent some of the tragedies that we are witnessing in other parts of our country and state.

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