The Shape of God
A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on September 27, 2026
Covenant Presbyterian Church, Athens

If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty 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. 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 slave,
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.
Therefore, God exalted him even more highly
and gave him the name
that is above every other name,
so that at the name given to 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.
(Philippians 2:1-11, NRSVue)

In May 1969, Fred Rogers – *Mister* Rogers – did something on children's television that looked almost absurdly simple. It was a hot day in the Neighborhood, and Mister Rogers had filled a little plastic wading pool with water so that he could cool his feet. Then Officer Clemmons came by – François Clemmons, the Black singer and actor who played the neighborhood policeman – and Rogers invited him to sit down beside him and put his feet into the water too. So, there, they sat for a while, two grown men with their shoes and socks off, their feet together in a little pool. And when Clemmons got ready to leave, Rogers bent down with a towel and helped dry his feet.

It was such a small thing. But then, this was *1969*, when swimming pools and other public spaces were still among the places where Americans contested, sometimes violently, whether Black and white bodies could share the same water. Mister Rogers never stopped the program to explain what he was doing. He didn't raise his voice. He simply invited another human being

into the water, and then bent down with a towel. Something about that quiet gesture made another way of living together imaginable and visible.

There are moments like that when something that appears simple or small somehow reveals a *different kind* of strength. Nothing about Fred Rogers kneeling with a towel looked "powerful" by any usual standards of power. Yet, more than half a century later, people still remember it.

I thought of that as I was meditating on this strange passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians, because Paul is asking us to look again at some things we thought we already understood: greatness, glory, lordship, *power*. And ultimately, *God*. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," he writes, as he then offers this extraordinary description of Christ:

> *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 slave …*

And from there, the movement is almost entirely downward. Into the world. Into human life. Into servanthood. Into obedience. Down even into death, "even death on a cross."

There's something a little off-putting about that movement, because when human beings imagine God, we generally look in the other direction. We look *upward*. God is *above* us: majestic, sovereign, glorious, almighty. God creates worlds and commands seas and makes mountains tremble. Scripture itself gives us plenty of language like that, and there's nothing wrong with it. But then Paul says: if you *really* want to know what this majestic God is like, look at *Jesus*. And Jesus *bends down*.

This is where Philippians 2 becomes much more than a lesson about humility. Paul is not simply telling us that Jesus possesses the admirable virtue of being humble, and therefore we should try harder to be humble ourselves. He's saying something much more startling than that.

Jesus Christ does not begin "in the form of God" and then temporarily *stop* looking like God when he becomes a *servant*. This *is* what God looks like. The humility of Christ doesn't contradict God's deity; it *reveals* it. The servant form of Christ is not a disguise covering divine glory. It is the shape that divine glory takes, in love.

The great theologian Karl Barth once put this with a kind of exuberance that has spoken to me for years. In an essay called *The Humanity of God*, he described God's freedom as the freedom

> *to be wholly exalted but also completely humble, not only almighty but also almighty mercy, not only Lord but also servant, not only judge but also Himself the judged, not only [our] eternal king but also [our] brother in time. And all that without in the slightest*

> *forfeiting God's deity! All that, rather, being the highest proof and proclamation of God's deity! The One who does and manifestly can do all that, that One and no other is the living God*.

Do you hear what Barth is saying? God doesn't have to choose between majesty and mercy. God's majesty takes the *form* of mercy. God does not cease to be Lord in becoming servant. This is the kind of Lord God is. God does not surrender divine greatness by stooping toward us. This stooping love is the very revelation of divine greatness.

It's natural to decide beforehand what God *must* be like and then try to fit Jesus into the definition. But Christian faith looks at Jesus Christ and allows *him* to tell *us* what the word *God* means. And Paul takes us all the way to the cross. "Even death – death on a cross." That's where any easy understanding of divine power finally collapses.

The cross is what Rome does to people who have no power left. It is humiliation displayed publicly. It is the empire demonstrating that it can break a human body and hang the result beside a road as a warning to everybody else. And Paul dares to tell us that this broken, crucified one takes us into the very heart of God's own life. Here is how far divine love will go in entering the depths of our human condition. Here, even in suffering and apparent defeat, the strange power of God is being revealed.

Nearly nineteen centuries later, writing from a Nazi prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized something of the same mystery. He was living under a regime that worshiped strength, force, and domination, and he had seen where that vision of power could lead. Yet from within its prison walls, he could write six astonishing words: "Only the suffering God can help."

Bonhoeffer was not romanticizing suffering. He knew too much about suffering for that. He was saying that the God who can truly meet us and help us is not a God who remains safely above human anguish, dispensing solutions from some protected distance. In Jesus Christ, God *enters* it. God comes *all the way down* into the places we fear the most – into vulnerability, abandonment, pain, death – and even there, *God remains God*.

Our great mistake, then, about divine power is not that we have imagined God as powerful. God is, indeed, that. It's just that we have too often allowed something other than Jesus to teach us what power *means*. Because the *world* has *plenty* of definitions. Power controls the room. Power gets its way. Power protects its position. Power makes other people yield. Power wins often enough that nobody dares question whether it deserves to.

And humility? Meekness? Servanthood? They can look almost useless in such a world – lovely virtues for private spirituality, maybe, but hardly serious ways of dealing with people who know how to seize power and use it.

Christians are no more immune to that worldly imagination than anyone else. *We* can begin to think that what the church *really* needs is more *control*: more cultural influence, more ability to

make society bend toward our convictions, more *power* to make other people live as we believe they should. We might become so anxious about the church losing its place that Caesar's kind of power begins to look rather attractive.

But then Paul places *Christ* before us. *Look again*, he would tell us. The claim of Christian faith is that the power of *God* has a *shape – and that shape is Christ*. That distinction is terribly important, because Philippians 2 has sometimes been used badly, especially against people who were already being diminished. "Be humble." "Submit." "Accept your place." But the self-emptying of Christ is not imposed humiliation. Christ is not being rendered powerless by someone stronger. What Paul is describing is a freedom so complete that Christ does not *need* to grasp at status or protect himself from giving. It's a strength liberated from the need to dominate.

And it is in this conviction, that Paul turns toward the church: "Let the same mind be in *you* that was in Christ Jesus." If this is the shape of God, then what shape should the life of God's people take? That question comes very close to home.

Every church possesses some form of power, and Covenant is no exception. We have money. We have a building and land. We have educated and capable people, social connections, knowledge, time, voices that can be heard. Covenant has *power.* The question is what *shape* our power takes in faithfulness to Christ.

Sometimes it looks very ordinary. It can look like a bag of groceries moving from a cart into someone else's car. It can look like a kitchen being used to prepare meals for people who may never sit in this sanctuary. It can look like rooms opened because somebody needs a place to gather, or money leaving our accounts because somebody else needs it more urgently than we do.

Sometimes it takes a more public form: standing beside people whose dignity is being threatened, speaking when silence would be easier, using whatever access or standing we possess to make more room in this community for people who have too often been pushed toward its edges.

None of those things, of course, means that we have mastered the mind of Christ. God save us from becoming impressed with our own humility! We are simply trying, imperfectly, to learn the shape, for that's what ministry *is* at its deepest: allowing whatever has been placed in our hands to become *life* for somebody else.

That's why Christian humility is *not* timidity. The church doesn't need to become "harmless" and inoffensive. It needs to become *Christlike*, and that means that there are times our love *must* be *fierce*. There are moments when mercy *requires* resistance, when service means standing between someone vulnerable and the force that would harm them, when faithfulness requires speaking a truth that those powerful in the fashion of the world would rather not hear.

Yet even then, the church must remember whose shape it bears. We cannot resist the forces of domination by becoming enamored of domination ourselves. We cannot proclaim the servant Christ while secretly wishing we had Caesar's throne. The church has never been called to out-Caesar Caesar. We have been called to have among ourselves the mind that was in Christ Jesus.

Which takes me back to that little plastic pool. Two pairs of feet in the water. A towel. A man bending down. Mister Rogers didn't overturn segregation with that gesture. He didn't imagine that one quiet TV scene could heal the enormous wound of American racism. But for a few minutes, in a children's television neighborhood, another world became visible. Two people shared the same water, and one bent toward the other in care.

Nothing was conquered. Nobody was made smaller. And yet something powerful happened. Perhaps that's why the scene has endured. It bears, in its own modest way, the shape Paul asks us to recognize.

The One who is wholly exalted bends low. The Lord takes the form of a servant. Almighty power becomes almighty mercy. And wherever the church allows its own strength to take that shape – wherever what we have becomes grace for another, wherever power makes room rather than closes ranks, wherever love bends down and serves – something of that strange new world breaks into our own, and in those moments, people can truly see the shape of God. Amen.