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3 January 2020

Title: Keep the X in X-mas

- Our scripture today comes from the second chapter of Paul's epistle to the church at Philippi, and if you joined us for our sermon series on Philippians back in April and May, then you may recall that some of these verses, namely verses 5 through 11 are often called the "kenosis hymn."
- You may also recall that "Kenosis" is a Greek word meaning "emptying"—and these verses are called the kenosis hymn because that's what they're about—God's emptying out into humanity—you see that referred to specifically in verse 7—Jesus was in the form of God but didn't consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, something to be exploited, but EMPTIED HIMSELF OUT, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness—the verb there is *ekenosen*, to empty, and it's related to the adjective *kenos*, which describes that which IS empty—and so what Paul is describing here is the "kenotic" movement of the incarnation—from the glory of heaven, from the Godhead into humanity—and not just simply into human form—the Son does not leave the glory of heaven and enter humanity as a king or a priest in a palace or a temple—no, the Son enters humanity in the form of a slave, and is not just "emptied out," but emptied out in humility and obedience, even to death, even to death on a cross.
- But in verse 9 we find a "therefore"—so let's find out what it's there for—therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him a name above every name 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.

- But Paul doesn't just include this kenosis hymn—which was probably a familiar hymn to the church at Philippi—simply to illustrate the way incarnation works—to describe the way that Christ Jesus left the glory of heaven and, as Charles Wesley so eloquently put it—emptied himself of all but love and bled for Adam's helpless race—**and was therefore exalted by God above every name**--no, Paul is not just describing the incarnation and the crucifixion and resurrection, no he's doing more than that—Paul is commanding his audience to be like this—to have the same mind that Jesus has—that same mind that does not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, that same mind as the one who emptied himself, humbled himself, and became obedient even unto death on a cross.
- “Be of the same mind, Paul says, “be of ONE mind,” in full accord—everybody in agreement, on the same page—but what is Paul talking about? What is it that the church is to be in agreement ABOUT?
- Paul tells us that in the middle of verse 2—having the same love—the same LOVE—and if you predicted that the word for that love is *agape* you are correct—that Godly, self-sacrificing love, the same love—agape—that Jesus is talking about when he tells us that the greatest commandment is to Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and to love your neighbour as yourself—agape—in every gospel account that same word is used. And it's the word Paul uses here. Agape.

- And Paul goes a step further—he tells the church what *agape* looks like—he gives them 2 commands they are to follow in order to be of the same love—of the same mind as Jesus—
- We find these 2 commands in verses 3 and 4--and in both of them Paul describes not only what TO DO, but what NOT to do—let’s look at these 2 verses together, verse 3
- 3 Do **nothing** from selfish ambition or conceit, **but** in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Verse 4 Let each of you look **not** to your own interests, **but** to the interests of others.
- Now I just want to quickly look at a couple of details about the language that Paul is using here.
- Paul is telling these followers of Jesus to regard OTHERS as BETTER than themselves—well that’s even more of a challenge than loving your neighbour AS YOURSELF, isn’t it? To regard others as BETTER THAN yourself—and Paul tells the church NOT to look to their own interests, but to the interests of OTHERS.
- And the first detail I want to point out here is that word “others” in verses 3 and 4. Now it is possible to think that since Paul is talking to the members of the church at Philippi, that when he tells the believers there to look out for the interests of OTHERS, he’s probably talking about other members of the church—other believers—other Christians. That’s a reasonable suggestion. They need to work together, and help each other out—folks who are of the same mind can accomplish great things when they look out for each other. And that makes sense. That certainly makes sense if you look at the word Paul uses for “others” in verse 3. The root of that word is *allos* –and *allos* does mean an other, but it means another of the same kind. If you were enjoying a cup of tea at your neighbour’s house and they said,

“Would you like another?” You would expect them to bring you another cup of tea, and not a cup of coffee or hot chocolate, or a peanut butter sandwich. That’s what *allos* means—another of the same kind. And so when we read in verse 3 that the believers are to regard others as better than themselves, we would be correct that Paul is talking about others who are like themselves.

- And you might assume that Paul is saying the same thing in verse 4. That makes sense, but it’s not what Paul says. And I’ll tell you why. That’s not what Paul says because the word that is translated “others” there in verse 4 is not “allos” at all—Paul uses a completely different word—it’s the same word in English, but it’s not the same word in Greek—the root for the word Paul uses in verse 4 is “*heteros*.” And *heteros* is not the same as *allos*—*heteros* means another of a DIFFERENT kind—
- You are no doubt familiar with the English words “hetero-sexual” and “hetero-geneous”—both of those refer to others who are not the same—and the word that Paul uses here refers to people who are of a different kind—of a different class, a different type, of a different form—When Paul says to the believers, “look out not for your own interests but to the interests of OTHERS”—he’s not talking about other believers, other Christians, other church-folk—he’s talking about the Other with a capital O—he’s talking about those who don’t look like them, who don’t talk like them or think like them—people who do things differently than they do—even people who disagree with them—look out for their interests rather than your own. That’s having the same mind as Christ.
- But let’s back up to the beginning of verse 3, because there’s something very interesting going on there. At the beginning of verse 3, Paul tells the believers: Do **nothing** from selfish ambition or conceit, and the Greek word that Paul uses for

conceit there is this: *kenodoxia*—and literally, it means conceit, vanity, or selfish pride—but it is made up of two Greek words—and let’s look at the last part first—doxia—you may remember last week Pastor Tasha talked about “doxology” and she told us that the first part of the word “doxology,” “doxo-“ meant “glory”—so that a doxology was a hymn of praise—words that glorified God—and here doxia means glory as well—but let’s look at that first part-- “keno,”—it comes from the word “kenos” and it means “empty”—it is the same word that Paul uses when he talks about how Jesus empties himself out in the incarnation—but here Paul is using this word, *kenodoxia*—empty glory—to let the believers know how they SHOULDN’T behave—Paul is saying don’t bring empty glory to yourself, but have the same mind as the one who emptied (kenos) himself out, the one who **gave up** the glory (the doxos) of equality with God and humbled himself, even to death on a cross, and who is **therefore** exalted, and all of the universe—heaven and earth and under the earth is **filled** with the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the **glory** of the Father

- Now you might wonder why, on the last Sunday of the Christmas season, three days before Epiphany, I chose to look to the kenosis hymn in Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians as my text.
- And one reason is because the kenosis hymn is similar to the first chapter of John that we looked at a couple of weeks ago—where John says “in the beginning was the Word, and the word became flesh and dwelled among us—or moved into the neighbourhood as Eugene Peterson puts it—it doesn’t contain the historical elements of the Christmas story—the manger and Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and magi and Herod and Bethlehem—but it tells the story of what happens in the Christmas story—because the Christmas story is, at its heart, about

the Word becoming flesh and moving into the neighbourhood—and it is also about the one who did not consider equality with God a thing to be exploited, but emptied himself out, taking on human likeness and humbling himself even to death on a cross. And so, it could be pretty easily be argued that Philippians 2:5-11, like the first part of the first chapter of John, is a Christmas story.

- But that's not the only reason we're looking at the kenosis hymn today. The other reason is because the kenosis hymn, these verses here in Philippians, have been on my mind almost constantly as I have reflected upon a brief conversation I was involved in a couple of weeks ago. The truth of the matter is that it really wasn't much of a conversation—it was just a friendly exchange of a couple of comments on social media. But those couple of comments really got me to thinking.
- The subject of those couple of comments was the practice of writing X-m-a-s instead of C-h-r-i-s-t-m-a-s to mean "Christmas," and whether doing so was somehow inappropriate--disrespectful or insulting to Christ or Christians or Christianity, and whether writing out C-h-r-i-s-t-m-a-s instead of X-m-a-s was a way to "keep Christ in Christmas," or something like that.
- Now all my life, I have heard people say, every year when December rolled around, "Keep Christ in Christmas" as a way of critiquing the practice of writing X-m-a-s. They might see X-m-a-s written somewhere, maybe on a card, or on a sign in a shop window or something—and it just sets them off—they're suddenly clutching their pearls and offended beyond belief that someone would have the audacity and vulgarity to write that four-letter word, X-m-a-s—some folks almost lose their religion over it—now, this was not, by the way, the sentiment I came across in that social media conversation—but it is a sentiment I have seen expressed time and time

again over the years. Maybe it's a sentiment that you have expressed yourself, and if so, I understand your feelings, I truly do.

- But as I have been thinking about this thing over the last couple of weeks, I have just been wondering whether there might not be some way of looking at the word, X-m-a-s, some way of reading it differently from the way that causes people to get all bent out of shape about it.
- Now, it's really that X that people see as problematic, and not the -m-a-s. And as I've thought about that X and what it means—what it CAN mean and what it DOES mean—even though we're still a few days away from January 6, I've had a sort of epiphany. And so I'd like to suggest that maybe when we read the word X-mas, when we see that X, we might be reminded of some things other than those things that cause us to be offended and to get all upset. And I believe we can do just that, and so I want to make three points about that X—three observations about it—and I believe that God has something to say to each one of us today if we'll open up our ears and listen.
- So let's think for just a little bit about that X
- The first point I want to make about that X is this. That X is an abbreviation. Abbreviations come in handy when you're short on time, or when you're trying to conserve ink, or paper, or whatever you're writing with—and it's important to remember that writing and printing have not always been as cheap and convenient as they are for us—people in other places and at other times have not had inexpensive pens and paper—or WH Smith and Amazon-- and printing was a much more complicated endeavour than just pushing a button on your keyboard--and so people have been writing X-m-a-s, four letters, instead of C-h-r-i-s-t-m-a-s, nine

letters, for hundreds of years. And when they would read or write X-m-a-s, they would say, or comprehend, Christmas.

- I know that when I was in medical school and working in hospitals, I certainly appreciated the ability to use abbreviations in my notes—when I had a busy schedule, which was always, it was good to be able to write PERRLA instead of “pupils equally round and reactive to light and accommodation,” or note that a patient’s lungs were CTAB, instead of “clear to auscultation bilaterally,” or if a patient wasn’t telling the truth, what we call “malingering” in the medical world, to write LLPOF—that’s “liar, liar, pants-on-fire.”
- And there are, of course, many abbreviations that we use in everyday life, rather than writing the entire word out—few of us would ever think of writing out the titles “mister” or “doctor” or “reverend”—we use the abbreviations and we know how to SAY what they represent, even though all the letters aren’t there.
- Back when I was in college, I learned from my peers that when I was taking notes in class—especially if the professor talked fast when they lectured (that wasn’t the case in Craig Keen’s classes)—I could use Greek letters to abbreviate certain words that I’d hear often—for instance, I could use the Greek theta, just one letter to mean theology, or a Greek psi to mean psychology, or the Greek chi to mean Christ, and chi-nty to mean “Christianity”—chi-nty looks like this: X-n-t-y.
- You see, an X isn’t just an X, it’s a chi—the first letter of the Greek Christos, and Christians have been using the symbol, chi, that X, to mean “Christ” for nearly 2000 years, sometimes in combination with a rho, the next Greek letter in the word “Christos” OR with an iota, the first letter of the word “Jesus” in Greek. To us, that



looks like a capital letter I and a capital X. You can find the iota-chi monogram in Christian burial inscriptions at least as far back as the third century.

- Iota-chi is also the beginning of the word “ichthus”—that’s the Greek word for “fish”—and early Christians who were persecuted by Rome used the Greek word “ichthus” (ΙΧΘΥΕ) as a secret abbreviation for the statement, “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour,” using the first letter of each word—they could abbreviate that whole statement by writing the word “ichthus” or by using the symbol of a fish—a symbol we still see today. Early Christians used the ichthus to identify churches and other Christians, not because they **feared** persecution or torture or even death at the hands of the Romans, but because, as Pastor Tasha reminded us last week, they wanted to be wise because they knew they had a finite life-span and there was work to be done—there was a kingdom to be built—there was good news to be proclaimed. And there were people to be protected. And so symbols were used because only those who knew how to read them would understand what they meant.
- And so when I see the word X-m-a-s, when I see that symbol, that abbreviation, I know to SAY “Christmas,” but I also think of the scores of Christians down through the ages who have used symbols and abbreviations not to save paper or ink, but to make the most of their allotted time, guarding their lives and the lives of others. I think of those who lived with the daily threat of persecution and death, those martyrs who made the ultimate sacrifice, losing their lives for the cause of the cross—those down through the centuries and even those today all across the globe who have the same mind as Christ, who emptied himself out—those who proclaim that “to live is Christ and to die is gain”—those who act not out of selfish interest or

conceit, but in humility regard others as better than themselves, those who look not to their own interests, but to the interests of others—those who give glory to God and do not seek empty glory for themselves--those who humble themselves and are obedient, even to the point of death.

- When Pastor Tasha and I first started our nonprofit, Icebox Ministries, back in the states many years ago, we needed a logo for our letterhead and our business cards and our website—all that sort of thing. And at the time, Tasha was a partner in a marketing agency, and so we had some amazingly talented artists and designers who helped us with the design. And we met with them and we told them what Icebox Ministries was all about—about educational programs, and growing food, and cooking food and serving the community—and they understood all that—and we told them, “Now, we’ve got the word ministries in our name because that’s how we understand all that we do—as a ministry—but we’re going to be working with schools and public organisations that may have restrictions on or hesitation about working with religious organisations, so we want to be thoughtful about our logo—we don’t want anything that’s very obviously religious or Christian—no crosses or doves or Bibles—we don’t want our logo to be a hindrance to our work—and we don’t want people to think we’re a church because we’re not—we’re a charity. So no obviously religious symbolism.” And so the creative team said that understood all that. And so they set out to design our logo, and some time later they told us that they had some designs to show us—and I’m only going to tell you about one of them, the one we chose. So they met with us and they told us how they had come up with the design—they said we’ve used symbols to represent the three main areas of focus of Icebox Ministries—we’ve used a pencil to represent education, the

classes and teaching that you do, and then there's a pitchfork to represent growing and farming and gardening; and then finally there's a serving spoon that represents cooking and feeding people and serving the community. And then they said, we've taken these three objects, the spoon, the pencil and the pitchfork, and we've arranged them in the shape of the first and last letters of the word "Icebox," the I and the X, so it looks like this.

- And Tasha and I looked at the logo, and we looked at each other, and then we asked the design team—so, you didn't intend for this to look like any symbol in particular? And they told us again how it represented the I and the X in "Icebox," and what the pencil and the spoon and the pitchfork represented.
- And we said, well, this I-X design, this symbol—this is what's known as the iota-chi, that stands for Iesus Christos, Jesus Christ. It's been used for centuries.
- Oh, they said—we didn't intend any of that.
- So we said, so we stated quite clearly "don't use any obvious religious symbolism, and by using the I and the X of Icebox, you've created one of the most ancient Christian symbols anyone could think of—one that literally "means" Jesus Christ?"
- They said—it does look like that is the case.
- And so, we said, well, we can't argue with a sign so recognisable, with divine intervention that's so obvious. And so that became our logo, and we've used the same iota-chi design in the logo for the LargsNaz hospitality ministry's new North Coast Cookhouse program.
- I tell you that story as a reminder that this is how the name of Jesus, how the power of the cross, how the message of the gospel, works—even when an attempt is made

to avoid it, to obscure it, to hide it, it still shows up—it still rises from the depths and shines through. It is EXALTED.

- And so my second point about that X is this—X IS a way to negate or eliminate things, but. . . (and we're gonna wait just a minute to find out what comes after that "but)
- When I'm editing a sermon or some other writing, sometimes I'll come across a whole paragraph that needs to be cut—words that should be omitted—a passage that I want to eliminate. And I'll put a great big X through it.
- We sometimes see the same thing happen in our everyday lives—if there's a sign or a poster or a billboard that somebody doesn't like—especially when there's an election coming up—someone may see a campaign poster they don't like or an image of a politician they don't like, and they might take a marker or a can of spray paint and put a big X through it. And that means they don't like it—they want it eliminated—they want it gone.
- And I've done enough reading and observing to know that there are some people who quite intentionally use X-m-a-s in that way, and so they say X-mas as a form of derision or ridicule or as an insult or at least a critique of the Christ that's in Christmas.
- And it is tempting to get insulted, to get offended, when that happens. But I think it's important to remember that not every use of X-m-a-s is intended to be negative, to be a negation or a rejection of the Christ of Christmas, and I think it's also important to ask whether it is the Christian reaction to get offended, and to demand respect, when Jesus himself recommended rejoicing when we face persecution, when we are insulted, even turning the other cheek when we are physically assaulted—I think

Paul knows this when he tells the church at Philippi to do nothing from selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves—to look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others—heteros—those who are different from us, those who THINK and ACT and BELIEVE differently—and we should probably remember how Jesus and the prophets have been treated throughout history, and respond not by asserting our rights and demanding respect and propriety, but in humility and kenotic love—remembering what happens when Jesus is negated—when attempts are made to eliminate Christ or Christians.

- The Roman Empire was really good at negating and eliminating people and messages they didn't like—they knew how to suppress movements and how to squash the opposition using terror and violence. And so when Jesus, willingly and humbly, walks the Via Dolorosa to the cross, the powers that be think that both he and his followers have been nailed down, that they are dead and buried—that they have been negated—eliminated—but to the contrary—the crucifixion only makes the resurrection possible—the power of the Spirit works through that attempt to eliminate Christ and Christianity, and bursts forth from the tomb in triumph and exaltation, and the power of the Spirit sees the exponential growth of the church from that day until this very day, even in the face of repeated attempts to negate and eliminate the Kingdom and the gospel upon which it is built.
- Notice what Paul says in the kenosis hymn—he doesn't say Jesus was emptied by the Romans or by any other earthly entity—Pauls says he emptied himself—he made HIMSELF nothing—he humbled HIMSELF—he wasn't emptied or humbled or made nothing by another—and it's not any earthly entity that **exalts** him either—Paul tells us “therefore God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every

name”—and so any and every attempt to eliminate the name of Jesus is, in the end, nothing more than an empty gesture, because God exalts the one who is emptied out.

- And so I’m reminded that an X is not just a way to try to negate something, it’s also a symbol of multiplication—when we say 70 times seven, we can replace the word “times” with an x. And from the crucifixion down through the ages attempt after attempt to negate Jesus and his followers and the message of the gospel—to draw an X on them—to X them out— have resulted not in their elimination but in their multiplication, as more and more Christians, little Christs, have the same mind as Jesus and take up their crosses and follow Him. Those who say with John the Baptist, He must increase, and I must decrease. X IS a way to negate or eliminate things, but . . . X is also a multiplier—and that brings me to my concluding point
- An X is a cross
- In the US, like most kids, I grew up playing tic-tac-toe. But when I came to the UK, I found out that I had been playing “noughts and crosses” and that those Os were noughts and the Xs were crosses—and I’ve got to tell you, I like that name for that game a whole lot better than tic-tac-toe because it’s a lot more theologically meaningful—when I think about noughts and crosses, I can’t help but think about the one who made himself nought even to death on a cross.
- So when we read or write X-m-a-s and say “Christmas” we are reminded that the Christmas story is just the beginning of a story that leads to the cross. We are reminded that when we hear the story of Mary and Joseph and Bethlehem and Herod and the shepherds and the magi we are hearing the same story that is told in a different way in the kenosis hymn, and we are reminded that while you can write a

gospel without a traditional Christmas story—the gospels of Mark and John do just that—you can't really understand what the Christmas story is about without knowing where it will lead, to the work of the cross and resurrection and the exaltation of Jesus and the opportunity for Jesus' followers—and that includes us—to be filled with the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead, to have the same love, to be in one accord, and to have the same mind in us that was in Jesus.

- Now I don't expect you to stop writing C-h-r-i-s-t-m-a-s and start writing X-m-a-s unless you want to—I don't even expect you to like X-m-a-s when you see it. But I do hope that when you see it, and you will—it's not going away—you'll remember this sermon and read X-m-a-s in such a way that it becomes more meaningful to you—and maybe you'll have the opportunity to tell others how it can be more meaningful to them too.
- We still have a few more days of Christmas, so while it lasts, let's keep Christ in Christmas, but let's be open to keeping that X in Christmas, too. God bless you, and Merry Christmas!