

**MESSAGE FOR SUNDAY 27<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER 2020.**

**Psalm 119:33-40**

**Philippians 2:1-18.**

Selfishness is being concerned excessively or exclusively with oneself: seeking or concentrating on one's own advantage, pleasure, or well-being without regard for others. Selfishness is putting our goals, priorities and needs before everyone else even those who are really in need. In our scripture passage today, Paul compares selfishness to “empty conceit”—a term that could be translated “vanity” or “arrogance.” It refers to an overly high opinion of oneself. Selfishness, then, is akin to narcissism. It is often expressed by building up oneself by tearing down others.

But we are not born selfish. As young children, the selfless concern for the well-being of others, and our inclination toward it is supported in research. Studies of 18-month-old toddlers show that they will almost always try to help an adult who is visibly struggling with a task, without being asked to do so: if the adult is reaching for something, the toddler will try to hand it to them, or if they see an adult drop something accidentally, they will pick it up.

So if we aren't innately selfish, what causes selfishness in us and others? Partly it is the culture we live in. Cultures that emphasise individualism such as ours make it very difficult to see things from another person's perspective. Our culture today actively encourages us to put ourselves first rather than feel empathy for others.

By giving to others, some are fearful of losing control. If we think we are in control of our lives, we may believe that by being generous to others we are relinquishing some of our power. If we give once, they will surely keep coming back for more.

There are those who are narcissistic, believing that they are superior to others and entirely deserving of all they have. The narcissist is incapable of recognising any wrong in how they treat others or saying sorry when they make mistakes.

But our passage today reminds all of us that there is a different way. In following Christ, we are called to live with humility.

Psalm 119:36-37 “Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain. Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word.”

Tim Hansel writes, “Selflessness is an art. By nature, none of us are really into it nor do we really aim to master it. It requires a change in us, something that puts away the old nature of selfishness and takes on a new nature of selflessness. Our nature is to keep “us” for us. To truly deny oneself, to die to oneself, requires an all or nothing effort.” Then he tells the story of Angus McGillivray, a Scottish prisoner of war who was in the camp which built the infamous Bridge over the River Kwai. The camp had become an ugly situation. A dog-eat-dog mentality had set in. Allies would literally steal from each other and cheat each other; men would sleep on their packs and yet have them stolen from under their heads. Survival was everything. The law of the jungle prevailed...until the news of Angus McGillivray's death spread throughout the camp. No one could believe big Angus had succumbed. He was strong, one of those whom they had expected to be the last to die. It was not his death that shocked the men, but the reason he died.

Scottish soldiers were each given a buddy to look after called a “mucker,” and literally make sure their “mucker” survived. Angus's mucker, though, was dying, and everyone had given up on him, except Angus. He had made up his mind that his friend would not die. Someone

had stolen his mucker's blanket. So, Angus gave him his own, telling his mucker that he had "just come across an extra one." Likewise, every mealtime, Angus would give his ration to his mucker, stand over him and force him to eat them, again stating that he was able to get "extra food." As a result, Angus's mucker began to recover, but Angus collapsed and died. The doctors discovered that he had died of starvation complicated by exhaustion. He had been giving his own food and shelter to his friend. He had given everything he had -- even his very life.

The ramifications of his acts of love and unselfishness had a startling impact on the prison camp. As word circulated of the reason for Angus McGillivray's death, the feel of the camp began to change. Suddenly, men began to focus on others rather than themselves. They began giving what they had away rather than hoarding. They began to pool their talents -- one was a violin maker, another an orchestra leader, another a cabinet maker, another a professor. Soon the camp had an orchestra full of homemade instruments and a church called the "Church Without Walls" that was so powerful, so compelling, that even the Japanese guards attended. The men began a university, a hospital, and a library system. The place was transformed; an all but smothered love revived, all because one man named Angus gave all he had for his friend. For many of those men, this turnaround meant survival. The power of selflessness not only changed their lives but the lives of those around them. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:12).

Christ whom we follow is responsible for the greatest act of selflessness. Humanity and God are joined once more not through a bridge but a cross. The power of the cross is greater than any bridge mankind could ever build, and it is available for each of us. Through Christ's crucifixion we are enabled to have a personal relationship with God. The least we can do in turn is show humility in its shadow and lead lives that witness to a different way of living, the way of humility and joy in servanthood.

**Amen.**