

THE ZAX PHILIPPIANS 2: 1-11

Way back in 1961, Theodore and Audrey Geisel (Dr. and Mrs. Seuss) penned a tale of two Zax.

The Zax are lesser-known Seuss creations. Found in one of the smaller stories within the Sneetches book, they're two creatures full ofwell... themselves.

Their paths intersect one day in an open field. One is going north. The other south. They run into each other, and refuse to yield.

Each one is certain of his path. Each one is certain there is no other way to go. Both dig in, ready for a wait, ready to hold fast that EACH is going in the right direction for as long as it takes.

The story ends with the north-going Zax and the south-going Zax standing face to face, with the world all around them changed. There are buildings and roads, even a bridge that goes over them.

And since they cannot agree to step aside for one another and continue on their way, society builds up around them and they remain static, not moving, not accomplishing anything, not living. All around them is progress, leaving behind the Zax and their certainty that each one was right unwilling to budge, staying put for 59 years if necessary, while progress continues.

Have you ever had a relationship like that? One where two people reach an impasse, and it seems that no matter what

you do, there's no way to reach peace or get around it? This can happen not only in relationships between two people, but between whole families; between businesses or departments within the same company. It can any happen within community organizations – between schools and school boards; between churches that become divided over numerous issues; and of course, between nations and in our own governments.

People get their egos all tangled up so that they feel like they can't back down without becoming the "loser." So they stand toe to toe for all time, while everything changes around them.

The line at the center of Seuss' poem says, "Then the North-going Zax puffed his chest up with pride. I never, he said, take a step to one side."

Conflicts that appear quite amenable to an outside observer are often stand-offs when the two parties clench their fists, thrust their chins forward, puff themselves up with pride and refuse to budge.

When two parties refuse to move, continue to argue, each determined to WIN at all costs, stand their ground with feelings of pride and self-righteousness Nothing, nothing will happen, other than butting heads for eternity while the world grows around them.

We all have our own views of issues. We build walls around our views, and at times we are unwilling to consider the prospect of error. In a recent article in *Relevant Magazine*, *3 Reasons You Should Question Your Views on Big Issues*, the author says: "Most people, I would venture to say, do

not like to open themselves up to the possibility of being wrong on a particular topic. This is especially true when dealing with deeply held convictions. For whatever reason, we build walls around our views, unwilling to consider the prospect of error.

Unfortunately in doing so, we can perpetuate a level of ignorance that is both unhealthy and senseless. It seems that if walls are built around our views, pride is the brick used to build them.

Pride is blinding. Pride distances us from others; it keeps us secluded from the rest of the world around us.... It can be especially detrimental to the process of understanding and interpersonal relationship building. Not only that, but pride inhibits our own ability to see where we may be wrong.”

I have to admit, I’m guilty of Zax thinking from time to time. Sometimes I’m not interested in a best outcome, I’m just focused on protecting my certainty about a particular issue.

And then I’m reminded of Paul’s writing from today’s Scripture:

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.”

And then Paul paints a picture of Christ’s humble obedience – and reminds us, we are part of this family now

– the family of Christ that desires to be transformed into the image of Christ; that lives to put others before themselves; that embraces humility because it points others to Christ.

Humility is an important character quality in the Christian life, but it’s also one of the most difficult qualities to develop and consistently live out in our Christian walk.

The very nature of humility seems counterintuitive to our culture’s values. Our society applauds independence, fame, success, and self-reliance. Humility sometimes gets a bad reputation. I think it’s important to understand that humility isn’t allowing others to demean us or for us to degrade ourselves. It’s not allowing others to abuse us or misuse us. It’s not thinking of ourselves as inferior; rather, humility is, as author Tim Keller says, “not thinking more of ourselves or less of ourselves, it’s thinking of ourselves less.”

It’s being oriented toward others, valuing the welfare of other people. It’s being aware of our own limitations as individuals and as human beings; and keeping accomplishments, gifts, and talents in a proper perspective.

Humility is consistent with Jesus’ life and example; and with the teaching of Scripture. It’s how we should live out our relationships with one another.

But, how?

In our Monday Bible Study, over the past several weeks, we’ve been studying the prophet Micah. One of the best known verses in Micah says:

“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God”.

So, where do we start in that walk? How do we seek to cultivate humility in our Christian walk? It’s not going to be easy.

We have to remember we’re not in charge, we’re to walk in step with God. Not behind, not in front, but side by side with God. So we have to pay attention. We learn to walk and move where and toward whom God is moving—not in opposing directions like the Zax.

We have to learn to walk at the same speed as God. We either want to rush ahead, or like the Zax, we dig in our heels. I’m really good at moving ahead and effectively leaving God behind. But, both too fast and too slow are not keeping in step with God.

We have to learn to walk toward the same destination as God. What’s our next destination? Is it a place, a social condition, a situation, a relationship that God is seeking to redeem as he works through us?

The bottom line is: we can’t truly be humble without God transforming us. Sure, we can act humble for a moment, an hour, for 59 days, but to live our lives in humility takes a complete change of heart only available through the power of the Holy Spirit. It doesn’t happen because we try harder, it only comes as a product of God’s powerful grace released in our lives.

We have to come to Jesus, admit our pride, and ask Him to transform us. We can pray for a teachable spirit; as we search and glean from the Scriptures how Jesus taught and acted and lived out his humanity in humility.

And we can pray for those we dislike and/or disagree with. The Zax’s attack one another by saying things like “YOU are blocking my path. Get out of my way.” Rather than looking at the problem itself, they attacked one another. As someone once said, “It’s hard to stay bitter at someone if you’re praying for that person because we’re all level at the foot of the cross.”

So the next time you find yourself being a Zax, take a step back and think about the cost.

What do I lose for being right? What could we both gain and learn if we honored each other’s point of view? What do we end up missing out on because of our pride? Would our relationships improve if we stopped trying to always have our own way?

The truth is there will always be Zax in the world, trying to knock us off balance, to place obstacles in our path, to keep us from moving forward. From time to time, we’ll be those obstacles in another’s path. But, the good news?

Just like the highway, God shapes himself around those obstacles; and helps us to grow and get to where we need to be. He gives us opportunities to re-connect at the impasse and to connect to new places and new people, to new ideas and situations. Sometimes it just takes a simple act or a grace-filled word to build a bridge.

So, be patient. Not all situations can be resolved easily. And yet, we can be assured God is still working in the world building highways and bridges, connecting us closer to one another and to him.

Let us pray:

Lord God, help us to love well and serve all. Give us teachable spirits so that we may speak gently, listen carefully and learn to walk in your ways. Let the mind of Christ be ever guiding us so that our lives may bring glory to you. Amen.