

“Passing Places”

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If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:1-11)

During our Scotland pilgrimage last September, one of our longest travel days was the trek to the island of Iona. It took two long bus rides and two different ferries to get there. The second bus ride carried us west across the full length of the Isle of Mull. It was only thirty-five miles, but the ride took well over an hour because the road was just a single lane all the way across. So, every oncoming car or truck presented a thorny problem. There was just no room for two-way traffic.

To solve this problem, the Scots added periodic turnouts, paved half circles provided on one side of the road or the other. These areas were just long enough to allow vehicles to maneuver carefully past one another -- relatively easily for two cars... not so easily if one of the vehicles is a bus; really tight if both vehicles were busses. Still, the Scots make it work. And they call these turnouts “passing places.”

Seated up front, I had a great seat to watch each passing place encounter play out. I quickly saw that navigating them was a lot like a dance. The motions were scientific and choreographed. They followed certain rules, but there was also plenty of artistic interpretation – modulations guided by the relative size of the vehicles, curious bends in the road, or overhanging trees on either side. Once or twice a grazing highland coo joined in. I was mesmerized by the dance.

And then the dance became a sermon. With each passing place, it became clearer and clearer that I was watching something that has become exceedingly rare in this world. I was seeing people cooperate with one another. This was way more than a traffic pattern, I thought. This is an *ethic* that an entire community – an entire island -- had embraced. Somehow they all said, they all agreed, “Here in this place, we will share the road. Here in this place, if the passing place is on my left, I will pull off into it and wait so the oncoming car pass straight by. If the passing place is on my right, I will stop in place next to it and wait for the oncoming car to approach and glide around me through the passing place. And I can expect the other drivers to do the same for me. If they get to the passing place first, they will wait for me to pass by.



Note that this kind of ethic only works if everyone buys in. On that shared road on the Isle of Mull, each person is saying, "I cannot just be worried about myself and my own vehicle. I must also be concerned about the vehicle up ahead. I must see them coming and anticipate what ought to happen next. I must make decisions not just on what I might want, but what they might need."

And, somehow, they have done this. They have agreed to these terms and embraced them. And it is beautiful to see it in action, not just because they navigate these rules with such elegance and fluidity, but because they do it with such courtesy and grace. Yes, the Isle of Mull is a small community, but it is still glorious to watch them wave and smile at each other in the passing places. A few times our driver called out to neighbors by name. He asked one woman how her sick father was doing. What I was seeing went way beyond mere courtesy. What I saw was gratitude... joy... mutual care and understanding.

Unfortunately, I also saw a few times when the ethic broke down. From time to time we would encounter someone on the road who did not stop and wait when or where they should have... a driver who was either too clueless to notice someone coming or too selfish to play by the rules. When that happened, our driver would stay polite, but I could hear him grumble and mutter something under his breath, because now he had to slam on his brakes, or put our massive bus in reverse on a narrow bridge. And a road that had been smooth and easy had suddenly become rocky and hard.

Those unfortunate moments reminded me of something that we, here in New York, are a lot more familiar with: the "zipper merge" – places where two busy lanes converge into one. To quote Forest Gump, a zipper merge "is like a box of chocolates... you never know what you're gonna get." They work well when drivers cooperate and alternate decently and in order. They are actually very efficient when that ethic is observed. But in my experience that rarely if ever happens, because there are too many drivers who have no interest in cooperation. A zipper is not the place for ethics; it is an opportunity to grab the advantage, to get ahead, to edge out some fellow travelers and steal an extra 20 or 40 feet, because that really can make all the difference.

If the Scottish passing place is a metaphor for an ethic that works for many, the American zipper is a metaphor for an ethic that works for few. Somehow, as a society, we forget that life is not a game of grabbing everything we want for ourselves... it is an invitation to care not only about ourselves, but also about others. As people, I fear that we have forgotten the truth that a little "cooperative yielding" can be good for everyone.

As people of faith we have no excuse for that forgetfulness, because scripture reminds us again and again. This was what Paul was doing when he wrote his letter to the Philippians. Paul loved the church in Philippi dearly. They were his first congregation, and they had started out so beautifully. They had experienced true Christian love, they knew how to live it and how to share it. But things were beginning to fray. The ethic of their love was breaking down, and it pained Paul deeply for them to be losing what had made them so special. So Paul wrote to remind them.

"Do you miss feeling joy?" he wrote. "Do you miss grace and gentleness and compassion? Do you want to get those feelings back? Then you need to set one thing straight. You need to be agreed and of one mind about one, critical, ethical truth: *Do nothing from selfish ambition or 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.*"

This guidance from Paul is the foundation of Christian ethics. To make sure we don't forget it, scripture reminds us repeatedly:

- Galatians 5: *"do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become [servants] to one another..."*
- 1 Corinthians 13: *"Love... does not insist on its own way..."*
- Matthew 23: *"The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts [themselves] will be humbled, and whoever humbles [themselves] will be exalted."*
- Romans 15: *"We who are strong have an obligation to bear with [those who are] weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please [our] neighbor for [their] good, to build [them] up."*
- 1 Corinthians 10: *"Let no one seek their own good, but the good of their neighbor."*

This ethic is rooted in the example of Christ. Scholars believe that the second chapter of Philippians quotes the lyrics of an ancient Christian hymn. In the words of the song, the pattern of Christ -- who had the full power of heaven at his disposal but still opted to humble himself and lay down his life for others -- is made the example for all who would be his disciples. We are to put the needs of others before our own needs, just as he did. In the words of the First Epistle of John, *"By this, we know love, that [Christ] laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for [our] brothers."*

In other words, a Christian life will have many passing places. There is never a time when we should not be looking down the road for oncoming neighbors. We are to be constantly aware of those who are sharing the road with us, and we should always be prepared to yield to a fellow traveler when they are vulnerable or in need. The beautiful irony in this ethic is that, if we do this well, life will be better for everyone.

Unfortunately, we are not doing this well. Instead of viewing life as a road traveled together, it is more like a race for advantage. Instead of seeing other cars as neighbors, we see them as obstacles, impediments, or even enemies. If we can jump ahead, we do it. If we can make things easier for ourselves, we will, even if it harms someone else. Selfishness has always been a problem in human nature, but what is happening now is different. Compassion and care for others, ideas that are foundational to the Christian life, are being openly mocked and ridiculed as weak and pathetic.

If we want to change this anti-ethic, the change begins within each of us. And we can start by looking out for opportunities to share the road of life. Are there places in our lives where we can slow ourselves down, so that someone else can move forward? Are there places where we might actually stop to let someone else go first? Are there places where we have been exhausting ourselves with selfish jockeying for position, places that might be transformed into something beautiful if we are willing to occasionally put the needs and interests of others before our own?

I promise you that these passing places exist. They are not just patches of pavement on backcountry roads. I promise you that, if we can just slow down to look and listen more thoughtfully, we will find plenty of ways to be less competitive and more cooperative. Right now, on the Isle of Mull, motorists are literally proving the point that Paul wants us to understand: that real joy can be found in the passing places... love is alive in the passing places... life is better for everyone in the passing places. So, may the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus... may our joy be more complete... may we be of the same mind, with the same love, being in full accord... and build some passing places of our own. **Amen.**