

A MIND LIKE CHRIST

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

TEXT: Philippians 2:5 “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus . . .

PURPOSE: To encourage us, as a community of faith seeking to follow Jesus, to adopt his way of humble servanthood, trusting that God is working in us to make this possible.

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September 27, 2020

How is it with our minds? Remember that old quip, which lamented that “of all the things I’ve lost, I miss my mind the most”? There’s a bit of truth to that, especially as we age. I used to say about myself: Here’s a guy who can memorize large portions of scripture, but climbs the steps and can’t remember what it was he went upstairs for.

In the pandemic, many of us have been wondering if we really have lost our minds. We forget what day of the week it is. We miss online meetings because, well, they’re online meetings. We have trouble organizing our thoughts and establishing our priorities. And, we are more intensely emotional about issues and events than we had been about such things before the pandemic disrupted our world.

This morning, we heard Jesus tell a parable about two sons, the first, who said he’d go to work in his father’s vineyard but didn’t; the second, who refused to go at first but then did go. Maybe that first son wasn’t renegeing intentionally. Maybe he just got distracted, like we get distracted these days.

Perhaps you’ve heard of, or may already be practicing, a meditative technique known as *mindfulness*. What I know about mindfulness is that it’s a simple practice enabling us to be fully in the present moment. We allow thoughts about what has been or what will be to be gently set aside so that we come to be all together right where we are. One benefit of practicing mindfulness is that, for the rest of the day, our minds are somewhat less prone to being scattered or distracted.

I don’t know any place in the Bible which encourages mindfulness. But in today’s passage from his Letter to the Philippians, Paul said this: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” What does he mean by that? Is Paul suggesting some sort of mind transplant, replacing our mind with the mind of Christ? Or maybe he was thinking of something along the lines of the “Vulcan Mind Meld.” Remember that from the first *Star Trek* series? Spock was able to read a person’s thoughts by touching that person’s head with his fingertips. Probably that’s not exactly what Paul had in mind. There’s a big difference between Jesus knowing what we’re thinking – he can do that without touching our heads with his fingers– and us thinking the way Jesus thinks.

Imagine what it would be like for our thinking to be Jesus thinking. I believe Jesus was completely undistracted, totally centered in God, completely in sync with God’s will. That is beyond what I can imagine for myself, and perhaps, more than I would want.

What difference would it make in our willingness to have the mind of Christ if, instead of saying “*have* the same mind, the verse said, “*Allow* the same mind in you that was in Christ”? Those of you who use computers – when we’re installing a new program, a dialog box pops up to ask if we will “allow program *x* to make changes to your device.” We can click “yes” or “no.” What if a little box showed up, visible to our mind’s eye, asking if Jesus is allowed to make changes to the way we think, in particular with what we think about ourselves in relation to others?

Paul’s point wasn’t for the Christians in Philippi, or for us, to have the mind of Christ in all its fulness. Follow his discussion carefully in this part of the letter, and it’s clear that what he means is for us to think of ourselves as Jesus thought of himself, as humble servants who look not to our own interests, but to the interests of others. Paul quoted an ancient Christian hymn to drive home his point. The hymn declares that, even though Christ shared God’s nature, he didn’t regard his equality with God as something to hold on to. Instead, he emptied himself. He became a servant. He humbled himself, and in obedience to God, accepted death on a cross. What Paul wanted to be true about the Philippian Christians was that they would follow Christ’s example of humble obedience. That is a tall order, even for people like us who want to follow Jesus. But keep in mind that we’re not expected to embrace that stance on our own. Rather, we’re allowing God to make the needed changes in our minds.

All this is fine, except for this: the way I’ve presented this mind-change so far suggests that it’s all about our individual minds being changed. It is about that, for sure, but as I said in last week’s message, Paul was interested in the Philippian congregation as a body having the mind of Christ. Go back to the first verse in the passage: “If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, have the same love, be in full accord and of one mind.” All that clearly refers to the Philippian’s life together, to how congregations ought to comport ourselves as communities which share the life of Christ.

In the Greek language, there’s two different words for “if,” which refer to two different ways we use that word. There’s the use of “if” when the condition is not possible, as in, “if I had a million dollars” (but I don’t). And also, there’s the use of “if” which is positive, as in, “if social distancing does reduce the possibility of spreading the virus” (and it does). The “if’s” in this passage are of the second kind – if there is encouragement (and there is); if there is consolation from love (and there is). Yes, of course our community is blessed with encouragement, and with love, and with sharing in the Spirit and compassion and sympathy. Therefore, we have everything we need for God to successfully make changes to our common mind so that we as a church

regard our life together as Christ regarded his life for others.

There's a whole lot, maybe too much, of what can be called 'groupthink' in our culture these days. What I mean by that is that there are groups which require one hundred percent agreement with the group's stated values and ideas if you want to be part of that group. Political parties, online chat groups, movements and advocacy organizations may expect total allegiance or you're kicked out of the group. That is not what Paul had in mind when he urged the Philippians to "be of the same mind and have the same love, to be of full accord and of one mind." It sounds like a demand for a unity which requires uniformity, but it isn't. Christian unity isn't based on doctrinal agreement, but on allegiance to Christ. Our life together isn't about us all being in complete agreement about every little thing. Our life together is about us all following the same Jesus.

There's a line in one of the prayers of thanksgiving at the close of a communion service which asks this: "Go with us to the streets, to our homes, and to our places of labor and leisure that whether we are gathered or scattered, we may be *the servant church of the servant Christ*, in whose name we pray."¹ That's it. That's what happens when a community of faith has the mind of Christ: our identity is that of a servant, always acting for the benefit of others, both within and beyond our community. Wearing masks is a perfect secular example of what Paul was encouraging: we wear a mask not for our sake, but for the sake of others. So it is with a church which has the mind of Christ: we do what we do not for ourselves, but for others. *The servant church of the servant Christ.*

Still, this is one awesome challenge, that we as a community would adopt Jesus' way of self-giving, humble service to others. After all, this particular congregation is a fragile organization. There's not enough people willing and able to do what needs to be done just to stay solvent. We have barely enough money on hand to pay our bills. Shouldn't it be acceptable for us to do for ourselves, to work for our continued existence as a church? Yes, we can, but it's the reason why we exert energy for our survival that matters. We do what we can to sustain our existence so that we can share the life of Christ with others, so that we can be, as our motto declares, "a light shining from the village into the world."

But here's Paul again. After sharing that hymn celebrating Christ's emptying of himself and God's exalting him so that he becomes Lord of all, Paul urged the Philippians

¹Book of Worship, Service of Word and Sacrament II, option A.

to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” (Philippians 2:12) I’ve always liked that advice. It suggests to me that allowing Christ to make needed changes to my mind is an ongoing process which at times can be quite unsettling. After all, shifting from living for myself to living for others involves nothing less than conversion. I don’t know about you, but my conversion started a long time ago, and still seems incomplete.

But wait! As those grade-C TV commercials say when trying to sell us the next shiny thing– there’s more! Why should we “Work out our own salvation with fear and trembling”? Because, Paul says, “it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (Phil. 2:13) There’s God, Paul wants us to know, working in us the way a new program makes changes to our computer during the installation process. I must say that, when that request for permission to make changes to my computer shows up, I don’t have the slightest idea what changes are going to be made. All I have is trust that the changes are beneficial. It’s the same with our receiving the mind of Christ. The request to allow God to make changes in the way we think shows up. We have no idea what changes are going to be made. All we have is trust that the changes will be beneficial.

Actually, we do know what allowing God to help us think the way Christ thinks are. Any motivation having to do with ‘what’s in it for me?’ is replaced by humble investment in what’s good for others. Any sense that my relationship with Jesus is a privilege to be held onto is replaced by knowing that relationship as a blessing to be shared. Any whispering to myself that my ideas or my commitments are better than what others might have to offer is replaced by humility, by a desire to hear what my brothers and sisters in faith have to say, and a commitment for us as a body to give ourselves for others the way Jesus gave himself for us.

So yes, we can have the same mind as Christ has. We do need to allow God to make the changes in our thinking which will accomplish this. But those changes bring joy, and the blessings of unity in community grounded in the saving love of Jesus, and a re-orienting of our energies toward the people in our fractured, troubled world who need to hear that the love of Christ is Christ’s love for them. That sounds to me like the way of being Christ’s Church that I want to be part of. I hope it sounds that way to you.