

The Mind of Christ

Philippians 2:1-11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus....

Paul's words to the Christian community in Philippi are an affectionate plea that they have the same spirit, the same view, the same mind that was in Jesus himself. Paul didn't mean agreeing on everything. He didn't mean having the same understandings or holding the same religious opinions. He was talking about something deeper, something more real, something that could be seen and felt and experienced within and among those who had given themselves to following Jesus.

Be of the same mind, Paul wrote. Be in full accord with one another. This unity and depth of community has nothing to do with our thinking alike or looking alike or living out our faith in the same way. Recently someone commented to me about the real sense of love experienced here. This always makes me feel nervous. I hastened to say that we have our conflicts, our differences, that we are a group of messed up human beings. But maybe the difference is that at least we KNOW we are messed up and commit ourselves to working things through, to taking personal responsibility for being as understanding, forgiving, and compassionate as we can be. This, I think, is what Paul was talking about—the mind of Christ.

The word Paul uses here [*phroneite*] means something like viewpoint, or way of thinking, or we might say today, worldview. It is how we look at each other, the world, and ourselves. Paul is saying that we are to have the same way of looking at life that Jesus had. It is not something foreign to us as human beings. It is the truly human way of seeing, of understanding, of viewing ourselves and the world. It is our “right mind.”

The early Christian community found poetic images the best way of expressing the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. So now Paul turns to poetry to express to the Philippian community what this mind of Christ is. What we have here is what scholars believe to be an early Christian hymn or maybe a confession of faith. This kind of poetic expression of faith is meant to arouse our spiritual imaginations so that we see deeply into spiritual truth.

The hymn, which we find in verses 6-11, describes the movement of Jesus' life. He was in the “form” of God. That is, his life fully

expressed God, was fully transparent to God. He was a human being who lived in complete harmony with God and God's purposes for his life. But he didn't hold onto this as some kind of status or personal achievement. Jesus did not see his relationship with God as a personal possession that afforded him privilege or status or rights, or that gave him power over others. Jesus knew himself as a child of God, beloved and pleasing to God. And he called other people, and calls us today, to realize that same relationship for ourselves. If only Christians through the centuries had displayed this kind of mind! If only today Christians would have this mind of Christ!

The paradox is that Jesus did not grasp or hold onto his relationship with God as a special status. Instead, he "emptied himself," as the hymn says. He did not see life in terms of his own gain and achievement and privilege. He became a servant, literally a slave. His life of faith, his obedience was fulfilled as he lived in the service of life, not for himself. This is the truly fulfilling way of life.

This is important. It is the key to understanding the "mind of Christ." We find fulfillment and joy not as we grasp and cling to God or other people or anything else. Fulfillment comes as we become empty of the notion of being a separate, isolated self, pursuing our own ends. With the mind of Christ, we see deeper than that. We see our connectedness to everything and everyone, including God.

This kind of self-emptying relieves us of the painful emptiness that comes with chasing after success or status or personal security or even love as it is defined by our culture. It is complete freedom. We have nothing left to fearfully hang onto, or defend, or crave. We have only what we sense God is calling us to give to the world. This is the true meaning of obedience, a word rooted in the French [*obeir*], meaning to listen. Obedience is not "blind obedience" to rules or doctrines or anything else. It is not going through the motions like a robot. It is listening to God and our relationship with God and living out of what we hear. It is like the words of the servant of God in Isaiah: "Morning by morning, God wakens my ear so that I can live as one who listens, who is taught." Only in this way can the servant understand how to "sustain the weary with a word," how to speak and to live in a life-giving way.

The spiritual disciplines or practices that we commit ourselves to are crucial in this regard. They are not spiritual laws or rules that we take on as something that makes us special or we do for their own sakes. Practicing inner quietness, silence, meditation, prayer, study of scripture, self-examination and -understanding—these are all so that we can listen to God, so that we can understand where we are grasping or clinging, where

we need to let go and be led. Obedience is listening to God and our relationship with God so that we can be freed to live as God made us to live, as servants of life, giving ourselves to what we believe God has given us to do.

Finally, the last portion of the hymn speaks about the resurrection. Jesus was so completely obedient to God and so completely free because of that relationship that he frustrated and aroused the clinging, grasping power of religion and politics. They couldn't control him, so they killed him. Jesus didn't die on the cross because God demanded some kind of grisly sacrifice or to load us down with guilt. Jesus' faithfulness and freedom were so complete that he could not be bought off or dissuaded or turned around. What was that Civil Rights song? "Ain't nobody gonna turn me around!" How did Isaiah put it? The servant of God says that he set his face like flint, fixed on what God had called him to do with his life.

It is because of this utter and complete faithfulness that God raised Jesus up to new life. This is the mystery of the resurrection. Living this life of servanthood means we participate in Life that cannot be defeated, killed, or controlled. But it is this last part of the hymn or poem that some sectors of Christianity have taken by itself and turned into Christian triumphalism. It goes like this: Because Jesus died on the cross and God raised him to new life, every knee MUST bend to Jesus. Everyone MUST believe in Jesus. And so Christians wage war, literally or spiritually, on people to make them bow down to Jesus. That's Christian triumphalism. We are right and you are wrong, so we are justified in pushing our way on you. This is not being in our "right mind," which is the mind of Christ.

Gandhi was asked why he was not a Christian. He replied that if he saw Christians living out the Beatitudes he might be persuaded! The last part of the hymn that Paul is quoting is dependent upon the first part. The elevation of Jesus to new life is God's response to his utter faithfulness as a humble, self-emptying servant. The African American spiritual put it simply and completely: "If you can't bear the cross then you can't wear the crown." New life comes by way of letting go, becoming one who serves life, and not by grasping at status or power or self-serving, especially in the name of religion.

So Paul's message to the Philippian community and to us today is this: Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. Other translations put it this way: Let the same mind be in you that you have in Christ Jesus. Now that's something! Another paradox! Let the mind of Christ be in you, the mind you already have because of your faith in Christ. It has already been given to you. The problem is that we forget our "right mind," the mind of Christ, the mind of being truly human as God made us.

So Paul is saying, Have the mind of Christ that you already have! We get back in this “right mind” by letting go, letting go of the grasping, the fearful clinging to whatever it is that we think will make us feel secure or powerful or successful. That’s where our real suffering is rooted. And the way out is to walk the path Jesus walked, the downward path of servanthood, of letting our lives be in the service of Life. If that is the journey we are on, the journey back into our right mind, the mind of Christ, then we will experience along the way God’s power of new life, of resurrection.