

March 28, 2010/Palm Sunday/David L. Edwards

The Mind of Christ

Philippians 2:1-11

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

Paul calls the community at Phillipi to have the same mind--the mind that was in Jesus himself. Paul did not mean agreeing on everything. He did not mean having the same understandings or holding the same religious opinions. He did not mean conformity of thought or action. He was talking about something deeper, something that could be seen and felt and experienced within and among those who had given themselves to following Jesus.

Sometimes people who visit us here comment on the real sense of love and peace they experience in our community. This always makes me nervous, for I fear they see us as some kind of ideal community. I hasten to say that we have our conflicts, our differences, that we are as frail and messed up as any human beings. Maybe the difference is that we try to be aware of all the realities of our lives, committing ourselves to an inward journey of taking personal responsibility for being as understanding, forgiving, compassionate, and faithful as we can be. I think this is what Paul was talking about—the mind of Christ. It is not a set of beliefs or ideas, but a way of looking at ourselves, others, and the world.

The word Paul uses here [*phroneite*] means something like viewpoint, or way of thinking. We might use the more contemporary words "worldview" or "awareness" or "mindfulness". 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 way God created us to see, understand, and view ourselves and the world. Often during our prayers on Sunday morning, Cassidy will thank God for waking us up this morning and clothing us in our "right mind". I like that every much. I think Paul is talking about the mind of Christ as our "right mind". He asks us to remember who we are as a community called together in the spirit of Jesus.

Now Paul turns to poetry to express to the Philippian community what this mind of Christ is. Verses 6-11 are what scholars believe to be an early Christian hymn or maybe a confession of faith. This poetic expression of faith is meant to help us see deeply into the spiritual truth of our life together.

The hymn describes the movement of Jesus' life. He was in the "form" of God. His life fully expressed God, was fully transparent to God. He lived in complete harmony with God and God's purposes for his life. However, he did not hold onto this intimacy with God as some kind of status or personal achievement. Jesus did not see his relationship with God as a 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. Jesus did not grasp or hold onto his relationship with God as a special status. Instead, he "emptied himself," as the hymn says. He became a servant, or 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.

Here 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 from 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 to which we commit ourselves are crucial in this regard. They are not laws or rules that we take on as something that makes us special or that we do for their own sakes. Practicing inner quietness, meditation, prayer, study of scripture, self-examination and self-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. We practice the inward journey in order to listen 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.

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 did not die on the cross because God demanded some kind of grisly sacrifice or so that we might be loaded 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 has set his face like flint, fixed on what God has called him to do with his life in spite of the insults and abuse.

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. This last part of the hymn or poem has too often been 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,” the mind of Christ.

Mohandas 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 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 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 and love of 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.