

April 17, 2011 / 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 [or whoever wrote the Letter] saw in the Philippian community what one would expect of a community of Jesus' followers. The church is to be a community of persons who, in their life together and the way they live in the world, manifest the spirit and life of Jesus Christ. When Paul writes if there is any encouragement in Christ, motivation of love, participation in the Spirit, affection and sympathy, he is not doubting that these things exist in the community. The "if" has the meaning of "since." Paul seemed grateful that the community at Philippi already embodied these qualities to a significant degree. Like us, they were trying to take seriously the life Jesus taught and to which he calls us, sometimes doing it well, sometimes not so well. They had a desire and commitment to be and to grow as a community of God's love. Paul is saying that since you have among yourselves some knowledge and practice of this kind of life, expand on it, deepen it. Complete my joy. Keep doing what you are doing!

Paul is not telling the Philippian Christians that their purpose is to make him happy! He is encouraging the community toward its fullest potential. Paul so deeply believes the Good News of God's love in Christ that his greatest happiness comes when a community really gets it, really wants to BE a community of Christ. Paul's deepest pain comes when a community calls itself by Jesus' name but acts in ways contrary to Jesus' spirit and life and teachings. Paul's deepest happiness comes when a community reveals its closeness to Jesus, thus to God, by the character, the spirit of its life.

Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Paul does not mean agreeing about ideas or thoughts, or having the same religious insights or perspectives. Paul is not saying everyone must think alike. The peace of our community cannot depend upon everyone thinking alike on issues of religion and life.

I have known congregations that are dominantly conservative, you might say, in

their religious and political views. They have ways of communicating that you really are not welcome if you are “liberal” in your views. I have experienced the opposite, progressive or liberal congregations inhospitable to those who may see things differently. Either way is wrong, Paul would say. That is not what he means by being of one mind. When communities become conformist and exclusive, the spirit of Jesus is lost. When we make the life of faith into agreeing with a set of religious ideas or doctrines, the spirit of Jesus is lost. It is much easier to cling to ideas than to actually live the life of faith and to love each other!

Being of the same mind for Paul is not being attached to a set of ideas, but sharing a perspective, an awareness, a way of looking at others, ourselves, and life. The “mind” Paul is talking about is something deeper and more at the core of our being than our heads, than our intellects. It has to do with the way we approach life itself. The mind Paul means reveals itself in the way we live.

Paul will say later what that mind is exactly. Now he advises the community about some ways of acting that reflect having this mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or arrogance. Regard others as better than yourselves. Paul does not mean ignoring our own wellbeing or putting ourselves down. He does not mean having bad self images. He means loving others as we love ourselves, with the same love, honor, respect. I was very touched by the practice of greeting in India. Palms are joined just beneath the face, the head is slightly bowed. In the south, the Tamil greeting is spoken, “Vanakkam,” (in the north it is the Sanskrit "Namaste"). On one level it means “welcome,” but also carries the sense that the other person as a spiritual soul like myself, one who deserves my respect and honor. This is the right view. Regarding others as better than myself means that this other person also is created in God’s image and deserves my respect and honor. The wellbeing of the other person is of utmost concern to me. Paul also writes that we are to look to the interests of others and not our own. It could be translated this way: “Look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others.” It is loving the neighbor as I love myself, in the same way that I regard my own life, in the same way I want to be treated. My interest is bound up with the interests of others, my wellbeing with theirs. If only those in public office today who call themselves Christians embodied this mind! We would not have to deal with immoral budget proposals aimed at the poor,

children, women, the elderly, and favoring the wealthiest.

Now Paul brings it home. “Have the same mind among yourselves which you have in Christ Jesus.” The “you” is plural. Paul is always speaking to a community about their life together. Christian life IS life in community. As a community, we are to cultivate the way of seeing ourselves, each other, and life that we have come to know in Jesus. Who we are, how we live together, the atmosphere and way of viewing life that exists among us are to be shaped and nourished by this mind of Christ. Whenever we find ourselves drifting into patterns that are egoistic or individualistic, it is a sign we need to go back to the inward journey of touching the mind of Christ. The mind of Christ is already our mind, says Paul. It is given to us as a community when we respond to God's call in Christ. It is our work as a community to let it be our conscious mind, expressing itself through our ways of living with one another and in the world.

What is this mind of Christ? What does our life look like when we have this mind? Paul quotes what may be an early Christian hymn that expresses poetically the deepest truth and mystery of Christ. This is not to be read as a statement of doctrine. It is poetry. Its images speak of Jesus' intimacy with God, such that he is full of God, on the same level as God. And yet Jesus does not cling to, or literally “snatch at”, that intimacy as a kind of status that gives him superiority, or that distances him from us. Instead, he gives up his status and empties himself. The word here means “poured out.” That is the way of Jesus, and it is the way of life for us. In his life which had the character of letting go and pouring out, Jesus experienced the fulfillment of his life and was elevated. He did not elevate himself, but was elevated through his willingness to offer his life in the service of life, to become a servant.

Here is the essence of the mind of Christ. It is life not as grasping or achieving or seeking status, but as emptying, letting go. True fullness of life is found not by accumulating but by opening our hand and our life. Our true humanity is not found by individualistic grasping and achieving, but as we seek the well-being of others, as we become servants of life. Jesus' life embodied what he taught—those who seek to hold onto their lives will lose them; those who lose them for my sake and the sake of the good news of God will find them.

Sandy Fisher said to me the other day that this is the most beautiful spring she has

seen. It is true. Springtime is when we see, touch, smell, and sense so forcefully the interconnectedness of life. Life is relationship. Nothing lives by itself or for itself. We are finally learning the truth about this earth, this universe of which we are a part--that nothing, including us, lives unto itself. The Western European white mentality, or "mind", that we inherited and are still taught is a terrible lie! And it has created so much deep unhappiness and destruction. True life is not about achieving our own personal aims and desires and goals, and using people and the earth as objects for our purposes. That might bring moments of happiness and satisfaction, but they fade quickly and there persists in us a great emptiness. Life is about our connection with everything else. We are the rain, the air, the earth, each other. Fullness of life has to do with finding our place within the fabric of life, giving what we have to contribute, and receiving what is given to us. This "mind" has to do with finding and living our place within the great community that is life.

I think this is how we need to read this profound hymn about the mind of Christ. It tells us that Jesus taught, embodied, and empowers us in life as it is truly made to be lived. Not grasping. Not achieving. Not competition or seizing power. But emptying, letting go, seeing that our own salvation, our own healing and wholeness, has to do with the well being of all and everything. The meaning of Jesus' life is that he shows us the way of true living as human beings. And it is not climbing up the ladder of personal achievement and accomplishment and pushing others out of the way as we get as much as we can for ourselves. It is the way down the ladder, into the life of relationship, connection, community, mutual helping. Salvation, wholeness, healing--that biblical word that is still so important even though it is misunderstood and misrepresented--is not about my going to heaven, my getting "saved," or MY anything else. It is about us, our life together as persons created by the same God and our life together in and with the whole creation into which our lives are woven. To me, that is what the self-emptying of Jesus means for us today.

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. During these days our attention is drawn to the suffering and death of Jesus, and the mystery that in this suffering is the key to fullness of life. It is the way downward, of not seeking status, of finding new life as we live our lives in the service of life. There is no greater need in the world today than to have persons and communities who live with this kind of mind, the

mind that Paul says is already ours in Christ, and that seeks to become more fully manifest in us and our life together.