

Sermon for Sunday, October 1, 2017

The Mind of Christ

It's happened to each of us, those awkward moments when you forget your best friend's name, or what you went down into the basement to get, or what you were about to say. And while such lapses in mental acuity are not the exclusive domain of any age group, they concern us a lot more when we get older for fear that we are losing our minds. Senility is an unwelcome and age-related deterioration of memory, and Alzheimer's is a dreaded disease that robs us not only of our memories, but also of our personalities and our dignity. So though we joke about having a "senior moment" when our brain takes an unexpected vacation, there is some genuine fear behind the laughter. We don't want to end up addled and weird, like grandpa did, telling the same story ten times a day and thinking we are getting married next week. No, we want to make sure we remain in our right mind.

Studies have shown that to remain in our right mind we need to engage ourselves in mental exercise. Reading is, of course, always good, and regular socializing is important. But it turns out that one of the real enemies of mental alertness is our routines, those things we do on autopilot, like getting ready for work in the morning. Routines, while comfortable, efficient, and easy, are mindless. They don't engage the brain, and consequently, it checks out. I mean, how many times have you left for work wondering if you actually brushed your teeth, or picked up your phone? You don't remember, because your brain was on autopilot. So what the researchers suggest is that we alter our routines from time to time to stimulate new brain function. Shave with your other hand for instance—boy, that will get your attention—or brush your hair with your opposite hand.

Now the culture in which we live also has routines that we live by, in fact, culture by definition is made up of those ways of living that are transmitted from one generation to the next. And encrypted into those ways of living are a set of values. It is part of our cultural routine, for instance, that good behavior is rewarded and bad behavior is punished. We all remember in school the stickers for perfect attendance, the rewards for good grades, and the consequences for disobedience. Though we claim that all people are created equal, our culture acts as if they aren't and distinguishes the rewards based on the differences. Hence we live in a competitive society, each person trying to earn more of the available rewards. Culture, you see, is the mindless routine of a whole people. It's what a people does and what they value and how they think when they are on autopilot.

Faith in Jesus Christ has been, now is, and always will be counter-culture. God's Word invites us to turn the world on its head, and to think, feel and act differently from the prevailing culture. The culture wants us to live on autopilot, mindlessly going about our business while unconsciously reinforcing its values. God invites us to fly on manual, allowing ourselves to be guided instead by the Holy Spirit. That's why making church a routine is so important. Because it's a counter-routine, like once a week brushing your hair with your other hand. Listening and reacting to God's Word engages our minds, hearts and spirits in a way that keeps us fresh, alert, stimulated, and manually engaged with our world. It takes us off autopilot so we can grow and mature into the creatures God intended.

Another study demonstrated that people who attend weekly religious services are healthier. The doctors think it's because we benefit from having a larger social network. I think it's because we regularly engage in a counter-culture experience that keeps us on our toes, that challenges us to keep growing, that renews our hope, and bolsters our courage, and not to mention, which helps us live authentic lives.

Part of this morning's scripture reading from Philippians—the part about the mind of Jesus—is a quote from one of the earliest hymns in Christendom. Tragically, the tune that accompanied the words was lost long ago. All we have left is the words. But the words are a confession of faith, and they sing of a mind, a heart, and a spirit that was different, that made the culture stand up and take notice, and which ultimately so

triumphed over that culture of death, that Paul can enjoin us who wish to live to have the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus,

Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross (Phil. 2:6-8).

This hymn invites us into a revolutionary frame of mind, that is, the mind of Christ. Such a mind has three characteristics: humility, obedience to God, and servanthood.

First, the disciple who would have the mind of Christ is humble. This is not a false humility hidden in self-deprecation, but a genuine humility that comes from knowing that one enjoys equality with God. Equality with God! But Jesus showed us that the one who has equality with God is not the one who exercises power and authority over others for self-glorification, but is one who gives utterly of oneself for the sake of others. That is how God exercises power and authority, as one who serves others, as one who humbles himself for the sake of those he loves, as one who empties herself for her children be they deserving or not.

Second, the disciple who would have the mind of Christ is obedient to God. Such obedience is not simply to know the will of God, or to proclaim the will of God, but is to do the will of God. In God's kingdom, knowledge is not power. In God's kingdom, love is power. The obedient disciple of God is the one who loves the neighbor as the self, bearing the fruit of God's loving Spirit in the world. When we love one another, we reveal our love for God, and are obedient to God's will. Such obedience will put us at odds with our culture. Our culture wants us to be obedient to its will. But the follower of Christ will live not for him or herself and the rewards the culture can give, but will live for the glory of God.

Third, the disciple who would have the mind of Christ is one who serves. We call Jesus "Lord" because we acknowledge him to be our master and our owner, the one to whom we owe our lives and our livelihood. His lordship, though, is not like that of the world which is based on the exercise of might and authority, but is based instead on self-sacrificing service to Almighty God. So Jesus can say to us that the first among us is the one who serves and the greatest among us is the servant of all, that is, that every living creature has a claim on our life. We are indeed our brother and sister's keepers.

How utterly unlike the culture in which we live! We have found that to survive and prosper in this world of sin we must serve ourselves. That's the routine. To serve God is foolish. To serve God is to be a loser. To serve God is to find yourself on a cross. But that, it turns out, is the way to authentic life, to peace and joy, and to hope and serenity.

Paul declared to the Christians in Rome, to those living in the seat of the prevailing culture of his day, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom 12:2)." It's an invitation to get off autopilot, and trust in the guidance and wisdom of God's Spirit as Jesus did. It's an invitation to have the mind of Christ and to be a part of creating a new culture, which is the kingdom of heaven. It's an invitation to new life, to authentic life, and to eternal life. It's an invitation to live in your right mind, now and forever. And, it's an invitation to join Christ and all of God's people at this table, the table of the Lord.

PRAAYER: Almighty God, challenge us afresh with your wisdom, your love, and your gracious will, that we may be shaken out of our complacency to live in our right minds, which is the mind of Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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Philippians 2:1-13