

## “Losing Our Minds”

We’ve just heard the scripture for today read aloud. This is what we do when we worship. We come to the place where we open the bible and read from it, then we close the book and move to the next element in the worship flow, which is usually the preacher saying his or her own words. Then, we move on from there, to a song or a prayer, and on to the end of the service. This is our pattern, a sort of worshipful discipline that gives us a touchstone to help us stay connected to God and to our faith. The reading of the bible is central to what we do, so don’t misunderstand me when I say the Apostle Paul might be somewhat discouraged to know we’ve used his letter to the Philippian congregation in the way we have today. Paul wrote a letter not scripture. I doubt Paul had any idea that centuries later Christians like us would read his words, every so often, as part of the flow of a worship service. He didn’t write the early Christian community so they would have a theme for a service. He wrote to remind them how they were to live as those who said “yes” to Jesus. This is true every time we open the bible, what we read is so much more than a 15 or 20 minute segment in worship. The words are intended to shape us and orient our lives, so that we live faithfully centered in the teachings of Jesus. It’s with this in mind that I invite us to hear the opening words of today’s passage, again. This time, hear the words in the context of our world. When we read Paul’s words this time, think about what’s going on politically right now. Hear what Paul writes against the backdrop of our cultural struggle for justice and equality. What do these words say to you when you consider what’s happening in your life? We say the bible is God’s word, so what is God saying to you as you think about your relationships and the judgements you make about those around you?

“If then 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, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...” (Phil. 2:1-5)

I’m the kind of guy who needs the manual to figure out what’s going on with a piece of machinery or some household appliance. I don’t just know. I’ve got to read it. Some folks do just know things or have an innate sense of how things work but that’s not me. And so, two times this past week I needed the manual. The one time was when I was changing the oil and filter of my lawnmower. I couldn’t remember the specifics and wanted to be sure I got it right, and then I nearly tore apart the garage trying to find the manual. Oh I know, you can google these kinds of things, but sometimes I’m just stubborn enough to do it the old fashioned way with a book I can hold, so I kept searching until I found the manual. The second time was related to a routine maintenance item of a new refrigerator. This was a filter thing, too, and it was the same deal. I wanted to get it right. “Kelly,” I said, “do you remember where we put the manual for the fridge?” I never have figured out how she remembers these kinds of details and I can’t, but this is how it is. Once I had the manual in hand I checked that the part I was ordering was the correct one. The manual helps us get it right.

Living as Christians is the most important and the hardest thing we do. What would cause us to think we can do this by figuring it out on our own. What Paul writes to the early Christians is like a manual for the faithful life. When we hold the book and read the words we discover that living faithfully is having in us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. Unlike a part we order and then wait for it to be shipped to our house, knowing what was in the mind of Christ takes some work. We are not mind readers, of course, but when we read the stories of Jesus what he was thinking is revealed. In a culture that saw children as nobodies, he gathered a child in his arms and said that everything God gives is given to them. When Jesus reached out and touched those who were deemed untouchable, he communicated what he knew, that everyone has a place in the arms of God. He healed those the world cast aside. He offered forgiveness and hope to those who were denied the same by the authorities of the world. When Jesus rode into the Holy City on a humble donkey, his mind was focused on the kind of kingdom that was not about position or power. When we read that Jesus wrapped a towel around his waist and washed the feet of his disciples, he was thinking how important it is to act lovingly and not just talk about it. When Jesus stood in the headquarters of Governor Pilate he bowed his head in silence. He spoke no words that day but we know what was in his mind. His authority would not be expressed through violence or force but by the quiet strength of love and service.

The late Henri Nouwen wrote a book years ago that was a collection of letters written to his young nephew. Like many young adults, Nouwen’s nephew was making decisions that would impact the course of his life. Nouwen wanted a life with Jesus to shape his nephew’s experience and he hoped his letters would point him toward the Christian way. In one letter, Nouwen describes what he calls the “descending way of Jesus.” This is what Paul’s

letter speaks to when he writes that Jesus “emptied” himself and “became obedient.” The descending way is not the way of the world. Our culture values whoever is the best, whoever is number one, whoever has the most, or controls the most, or influences the most. Our culture says that the descending way is the losing way. But Jesus pointed to God’s love by consistently choosing to move downward and be in solidarity with the lowly and the lost. This is the way Jesus’ mind works. He empties himself, humbles himself, comes down to be with us so that every person, no matter who they are, is loved and has the chance for new life.

Have the same mind in you that was in Christ Jesus. This doesn’t mean we all think exactly alike. It does mean that before we think anything, we think like Christ. Before we speak, we first think like Christ. Before we act, we first think like Christ. Before we decide, we first open our minds to the mind of Christ. I like what I’ve read from some who teach about the Christian life. They’ve said that our faith isn’t about trying to change ourselves so that God loves us but to realize God loves us so that we can change. Knowing this, what has changed your mind most recently? Most of us have strong opinions and we have more or less made up our minds about much of what’s happening in the world. Holding to our convictions can be a sign of strength but the strength Jesus gives isn’t about being rigid or unaltered. Having the same mind that was in Christ Jesus is really about losing our own minds for the sake of opening ourselves so that there is room for his thoughts and his life to become our own.

If you need the manual, keep Philippians chapter 2 close at hand. When you hear the news this week, or watch the next political ad, or make up your mind regarding what’s happening in our world, empty yourself enough to make room for Christ to enter in. It’s worth thinking about because to think about this is to be ready to live out the love of Christ, more and more. Amen.