

THE MIND OF CHRIST
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Mayer
September 27, 2020

In the Letter to the Philippians, we have correspondence from Paul to a mature congregation, not particularly in conflict of any kind, that he clearly loved, and in which he took great joy. It provides a very interesting opportunity to see what Paul says when he is not stirred up and struggling with complex emotions (as he so often is in his letters). This is Paul, near the end of his own life, in prison, writing from a place of inner calm and serenity to a church that didn't need correction; it needed encouragement to continue to grow stronger in Christ. Because Paul is not addressing a specific set of problems, we might say that this letter comes the closest of all of Paul's writings to offering general theological reflection and pastoral instruction; Christian congregations today may fruitfully read the letter on its own terms and apply it directly to their own lives together.

This is perhaps especially true since while Philippi was a small but important urban center, there was not a significant Jewish community there. So, the church in Philippi was a Gentile church, one that had been founded by Paul during his unique Jewish mission to the Gentiles. There are not the concerns we see in his other letters about the relationships among Jesus followers who are at different points along the spectrum from observant Jews, through Gentiles with some interest in Judaism, to Gentiles with no real connection to Judaism at all. This is a church that is all the way at the Gentile end of the spectrum, so to speak. As such, the letter is addressed to a church that is more like most contemporary churches in that Jewish observance and practice is not a significant part of the community's experience. As we know, Paul was not replacing Judaism but expanding it to include Gentiles. But this letter does not have to explain that. It can focus on what a healthy Gentile church looks like. It speaks to a parish like our own.

So, where does Paul put the focus in this letter? In stunning poetic language – verses 6 through 11 of today's Epistle comprise what biblical scholars call the Christ Hymn – Paul urges the church to “Let the same mind be in you 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.” (Philippians 2:5-6) “Something to be exploited” – this phrase translates the Greek word *harpagmos*, which means “to rob” or “loot.” It is a stunning word choice. Paul is saying that Jesus, before he began his incarnate earthly ministry, existed in heaven “in the form of God” – that is, he had the highest, most lofty status possible. But he didn't “loot” that status; he could have hoarded it, kept it for himself. (Bird and Gupta, *Philippians*, pp. 78-79) Instead, though, he “emptied himself” (Philippians 2:7a), from the Greek *kenoo*, meaning emptying as when a drink is poured out of a cup. (Bird and Gupta p. 79) Jesus “humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:8) And it is for *this reason* that God exalts Jesus and gives him “the name that is above every name.” (Philippians 2:9)

It is the mind of this Jesus that Paul asks the Philippians – and us – to imitate. We are to have this same mind. Our minds are to be transformed from a focus on status, glory, and power to obedience, partnership, humility, and inclusion. This idea would have been very foreign to the Græco-Roman culture of Philippi in Paul's time, but the Philippian church, to Paul's delight, was beginning to live it out. In the Christ Hymn, Paul's immortal language gives them words for what they are doing: imitating the mind of the exalted man from God who humbled himself only to be exalted again.

Listen again: Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. It is a mind that says no to earthly power, no to bigotry and hatred in all their forms, no to self-aggrandizement, no to injustice and inequity. It is a mind that refuses to loot and hoard God's gifts, a mind that seeks to share together in the abundance of Creation with all of Creation. It is a mind that can only be expressed fully with others, in community. It is the mind the Church is called to have.

It is the mind of Christ Jesus. All across our nation today, there is a great cry for an end to white privilege, an end to violence against black and brown people, an end to environmental degradation. We see the soot from the fires in the West in the skies over Westchester County, a small warning that we will not be spared for long. Collectively, with the mind of Christ Jesus, we in the church may say to the people of a dying world, empty yourselves with us, empty yourselves of privilege and destructiveness, that together our emptiness may make room for God's healing and transforming power.

And finally, the mind of Christ Jesus knows, as Paul says, that for all the fear and trembling of these days in which we live, "it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (Philippians 2:13) With Jesus, in the name of Jesus, let us will and work, together, for God's good pleasure.