

Sermon at St. Thomas by Lynn E Cunningham. February 3, 2008. Last Sunday in Epiphany. Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 99, Philipians 3:7-14; Matthew 12:1-9.

- 1. In today's letter to the Philippians, Paul writes, "All I want, is to know Christ, and the power of the resurrection..."**
- 2. Today, I want to look with you at what Paul was talking about in Philippians when he said he wanted to know Christ. In the letter to the Corinthians, he speaks of putting on the mind of Christ. In Romans, he says he wants to serve the law of God with his mind.**
- 3. How humans think about the problems confronting us is interesting. For example, a few days ago, I heard of two young couples who have just broken up because of some disagreements between them. My friends who had told me about these two couples said to me, well, it is just winter in Dubois. It is a Dubois tradition that lots of couples seem to break up in this season. Couples just decide they cannot stand each other any more and they split.**
- 4. The mind with which a person approaches difficult situations such as these can make a big difference.**
- 5. Suppose that instead of splitting, couples could learn to change their mind about handling a relationship. Suppose they could have a different way of thinking about partners, and relationships, and about other human beings. Suppose this different way of thinking intruded upon their habitual ways of thinking about relationships. Suppose they could see their partners with what Paul is calling the mind of Christ. This sounds like modern marriage counseling, but this way of thinking is not limited to marital issues.**
- 6. When Paul wrote about taking on the mind of Christ, he was not being pious, or abstract. He really wanted his readers to take on a very different kind of mind from the everyday mental habits people have.**
- 7. It is hard to imagine something more intimate and personal to a person than their own mind, their own ways of thinking. So, when Paul says he put on the mind of Christ, he really meant that he was trying to exchange his own habitual ways of thinking for the mind of someone totally tuned into the reality of God, and of God's love for the world, Jesus.**

- 8. For someone to put on the mind of Christ means putting on looking differently at the life partner they have come to hate for various reasons. It means seeing them with the forgiving love that God feels for every human being, not just with their own usual habits of thinking.**
- 9. Paul admits that even he cannot do this. He writes in this passage, "Not that I have already obtained this ... but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own."**
- 10. Maybe it is like having a lover that Paul feels completely unworthy of, but he keep trying his best to love them, because Paul knows they love him.**
- 11. Paul was kind of crazy about Christ. Listen to this. Paul does not want just to imitate Jesus' life. He is not interested in doing all the kinds of things that Jesus did in his life. Paul want to "share in Christ's sufferings by being formed into the pattern of Jesus' death...."**
- 12. What is going on here, with Paul saying that he wants to be "formed into the pattern of Jesus's death by sharing in Christ's sufferings."**
- 13. Why does Paul focus on the pattern of Jesus' death? Why doesn't Paul try to pattern his life after Jesus' life?**
- 14. Putting on the mind of Christ, means for Paul, not imitating the kinds of**

- activities that Jesus did during his life time. It means letting Paul's own very personal mind with all its Pauline habits be replaced with the mind of Christ.
15. To put this somewhat more prosaically, I think Paul is getting at how Jesus transformed people and situations, so much so that the early church quickly came to understand Jesus' death and resurrection as a pattern for many kinds of transformation: transformations both in this life, and in life after physical death. Jesus transformed the lives of those around him, including Paul's life. He transformed the life of the world. Jesus transformed everyone by bringing all closer to God, in this life, and in the life of the resurrection. It was not the patterns of Jesus' behavior in his life that really caught the attention of Paul and the early church. It was the dying and being reborn into new life in God that was riveting, for Paul and for many, many others.
 16. Chapter 3 of this letter to the Philippians illustrates much of what Paul understood about Jesus. Paul's own life had been completely turned around by the way Christ had come charging into his life and shaken it up completely.
 17. Paul brags in the sentences which precede today's lesson how thoroughly his life had been governed by Judaism, Pharisaical Judaism. He says that he had been circumcised on the eighth day after his birth, a central ritual in Judaism.
 18. His family had been of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin. He says he was a Hebrew of Hebrew origins.
 19. Finally, he says that he was simply above reproach when it came to justice based on the Torah, the Hebrew religious law. Paul just had it all when it came to being part of the Hebrew religion.
 20. Then Christ came smashing into his life at one point while he was traveling on the road to Damascus. The story is told in the book of Acts. He is nearly killed in that encounter. It was as if God had picked him up, given him a good, thorough shaking and turned his life around completely.
 21. After that experience, Paul considers the religion of his family's Judaism to be rubbish, so much loss, now that he has come to know Christ.
 22. So, Paul wants to follow the pattern of Jesus' death because the life that he had known had died away, and he found a completely new life in Christ.
 23. Let me say it again, putting on the mind of Christ, is not, for Paul, just a matter of piety, or starting some new religious practices. It means, simply, death to the old ways of thinking about yourself and your life, and replacing those old ways with a radical openness to the work of the Holy Spirit in each new moment.
 24. For a person to try to imitate Jesus' life is a possibility. The Gospel narratives reveal images of Jesus doing various things during his life on earth. He teaches, heals, prays, weeps, calls disciples to follow him. He cares about his mother and his brothers. All these things are understandable in regular people.
 25. But perhaps above all, as I said earlier, Jesus transforms people's lives, by bringing them much closer to God, by showing them how the Holy Spirit stirs in their lives to create entirely new forms of hope and love. And Jesus showed that again in the way he died, and rose again. Again and again the transformation is expressed in the Gospels in terms of dying and being born anew. Witness, for example, in John's Gospel chapter 3, where Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be reborn by the water and the Holy Spirit.
 26. Paul is very conscious that he has died to his former life, which for him had so many dead ends. This is not just imitating aspects of Jesus' life. Paul's life has gone all the way down, and now he can only express what has happened to him by saying that he seeks "to be formed into the pattern of Jesus' own death... and resurrection".
 27. One key to Paul's teaching is that everyone has the capacity to become aware of

- what they are thinking, and to learn to allow what goes on in their own mind to come closer to the mind of Christ.
28. **Recently I heard about a bumper sticker that says, "Don't believe everything you think". The human mind has the capacity to play tricks on itself, but it also has the even more interesting capacity to stop and ask, wait a minute, am I really seeing what I think I am seeing? Do I really believe what I am thinking?**
 29. **A local example of a person's mind playing tricks on them, would be the hunter out in the deep forest. He sees an elk, he shoots the elk, he goes to collect the elk carcass. And then he finds the elk carcass, and discovers he has shot someone's steer instead. The mind plays tricks.**
 30. **But the mind also has the capacity to stop and watch itself thinking. The human mind has the capacity to stop to take a second look before taking action. I gather part of the training for being a hunter is to look really carefully and thoughtfully at what you are about to shoot before pulling that trigger.**
 31. **When Paul says that he has learned to let go of all the major things he grew up understanding about the world, when he came to know Christ, the transformation is not just changing some religious practices. He has learned to take hold of whatever mental habits he has been following, and opened up to letting Christ guide his thinking into a new and more hopeful life. Who he is as a person is changed, because he has learned to interrupt his old habits of thinking, to let Christ come in and guide him.**
 32. **Couples who are splitting because they are convinced they have reached a dead end in their relationship, also have minds with the capacity to stop and reflect before acting. Like all people, they have the ability to let the mind of Christ intervene in their thinking, to play itself out in many ways, to show new forms of hope and love in situations.**
 33. **Probably everyone here has at some time approached a situation with the attitude, 'well, it is going to be my way or the highway'.**
 34. **Paul is saying that he strives to die to that mental attitude by letting into his life the One who is the Lord of creation, the Lord of new possibilities. Paul writes in the hope that the churches he is writing to, and you and I too, will do this as well.**
 35. **In Jesus' name. Amen.**