

10.1.2023 Time after Pentecost, 18

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Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Psalm 25:1-9; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

“He changed his mind and went”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Paul’s words about being “of the same mind” say something quite profound about the church. The church is not a club, a school, a political party, or a cultural center; rather, a church is a gathering of people made one in Christ, sharing the mind of Christ, and working together in humble service to God’s mission of love for this world.

Yet as ideal as these words may sound, we also know that churches can struggle with brokenness and division. People can forget their unity in Christ, a unity that helps them overcome differences, a unity that helps them, in humility, to regard others as better than themselves, a unity that helps them look to the interests of others rather than insisting on their own ways. Paul’s words to the Philippians are meant to encourage us to always find our unity in Christ.

Like any organization, society or nation, when people are divided, they stumble unable to accomplish goals and basic activities. Human power becomes vastly diminished as people fight against one another rather than working together for a common goal. This is why Paul encouraged the Philippians, writing, “*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.*” Paul says this because united with Christ, there is no limit to what we can accomplish for Christ.

The two things that Paul mentions, selfish ambition and self-interest, are character traits that most of us probably find unattractive in others. The trouble is we also have a hard time seeing them in ourselves. It’s not that “ambition” itself is wrong, it’s when ambition becomes only about “my success” that it becomes dangerous not only to our relationships, but to also our own inner self. The “selfish ambition” Paul mentions, is concerned more about “my” needs, wants, and desires before the needs of friends, family, colleagues, nation, and of course, one’s church.

This is why Paul lifts up the example of Jesus Christ who emptied himself, becoming a servant of all. Paul wrote, “*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, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.*”

“*Let the same mind be in you*” – these words encourage us to imitate Christ, always seeking to empty ourselves of self-centeredness and selfish pride. For all of us, if we are honest, your pastor

included, seeking the mind of Christ in humble service to others, is not always easy. Changing one's mind, self-emptying and serving, is the spiritual journey of a lifetime.

Paul uses a verb that has become well-known in English in the word "*kenosis*," meaning "to empty, to make void, to make into nothing. Christ's act of *kenosis*, of "self-emptying," is Christ's act of "pouring out" his divinity and embracing our humanity. Christ gave up asserting his divinity to that he might share our humanity – and in doing so shows us what our humanity is truly capable of!

We shouldn't be surprised to hear Jesus use similar language when he calls us to follow him: "*If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*" (Mt. 16:24). This language is, of course, not limited to Lent. It is the daily Christian journey of self-emptying, so that we might be filled with grace. When we pour ourselves out in humble service to others, we are filled with grace and peace, allowing us to see ourselves and our neighbors with the eyes of Christ.

Who of us hasn't changed our minds about someone? Who of us hasn't sought help in prayer? Today's gospel is not only about others; it is about changing our minds about ourselves. Jesus goes straight to the heart of the matter in his conversation with the chief priests and elders by telling a parable about two sons and a father. This could have been a parable about mothers and daughters because its meaning is universal. In the parable, the first son told his father that he wouldn't go, but later he changed his mind and went. The second son, however, answered, "*I go, sir; but he did not go.*" Though he showed polite deference to his father in words, he ignored his father's request.

There is a universality to this parable that should resonate in our hearts. Like the parable, I can think of countless times in my youth and as a young adult, when I refused to do what my father or mother had asked of me, only later to reconsider, changing my mind. Jesus is inviting us to change our minds about ourselves. The problem is often not an unfair request; rather, it is often that we do not see the good that can come in service to the request. Jesus' parable is echoing the words of today's reading from Ezekiel: "*Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? Turn, then, and live*" (Ezek. 18:25, 32). The changing of our minds, emptying ourselves for others, is the path to life.

The habits of our hearts and minds *can* undergo change. Paul understood this; he had emptied himself of his selfish ambition as a Pharisee intent on arresting Christians and persecuting

Christ's church. Paul changed his mind and followed the risen Christ, whom he had encountered on the road to Damascus.

The one who was obedient unto death and the cross, comes to each of us saying, "Follow me; empty yourself, pouring yourself out in loving service for others." Paul's words about the cross open us to service as something that will define our lives. Paul writes, "*[Christ] humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore, God exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name.*" Changing our minds and emptying ourselves is how we carry Christ's cross over a lifetime of service for others.

The cross is your life given so that others might have life. The cross is your life shared so that others might know acceptance. The cross is your life emptied so that others might be filled with forgiveness. Jesus emptied himself, sharing our humanity so that we might experience our true humanity in service to others. The cross is the mind of Christ.

Share his cross and he will share his strength with you. Serve alongside of him accepting, forgiving, and giving life to others. Change your mind again for Christ.

This is what it means to "*work out your own salvation in fear and trembling.*" This is *metanoia*, changing the direction in which you walk. Change your mind and go forth from this place again. Imitate Christ. Let him rule your heart and mind. Follow him in service to others.

Empty yourself again and he will fill you with grace and courage to live for others. Amen.