

The Mind That Is Already Yours

Philippians 2:1-18

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

WORDS WITHOUT THE DEED

St. Paul writes to a congregation he loves:

Complete my joy by being 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 count others more significant than yourselves.

Philippians 2:2-3, ESV

Then comes the sentence that holds the chapter together:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 2:5, ESV

He does not say, "Invent this humility. Work it up." He says the mind of Christ is already yours. Gift before task. That is the Lutheran heartbeat of this text.

Look around any congregation and you will see why Paul writes this. Rivalry. Conceit. Looking to our own interests. Grumbling. Disputing. We know how to keep score. We know how to take offense. We know how to say "yes" to God with our lips and then go our own way with our lives. This Sunday's Gospel is not far off: one son says, "I will not," and later goes; the other says, "I go, sir," and never moves. Words without the deed. Religion without the mind of Christ.

That is not only "the world." That is us. Original sin is not first a list of bad behaviors. It is a mind curved in on itself. Adam grasped at equality with God. We still do. We want to be served. We want to be right. We want the last word. A church full of people who each insist on being first will never shine as lights. It will only look like every other crooked and twisted generation, only with better hymns.

THE DOCTOR ON THE FLOOR

So the Law is sharp:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.

Philippians 2:3, ESV

Do all things without grumbling or disputing.

Philippians 2:14, ESV

If that were only a demand, it would crush us. We cannot manufacture the humility of Jesus.

A doctor walks into a pediatric room. The child is terrified of the white coat, the height, the authority. So the doctor does a strange thing. He takes off the coat. He sits on the floor. He speaks at the child's eye level. He has not stopped being the doctor. He has not emptied himself of skill or office. He has taken a form the child can receive, so that he can actually help.

A second picture, closer to home. A father kneels on the carpet beside his toddler, who has just knocked over a glass of juice. The father could stand, point, lecture. Instead he gets down to the child's level, wipes the spill with him, and says, "We'll get it together." He has not stopped being the father. He has taken the form of the one who needs help, so the child can receive help. That is what Christ did, only infinitely further down.

THE FORM OF A SERVANT

That is a thin picture of what Paul sings next. Many think verses 6 through 11 were already a hymn the church was singing. Whether hymn or Paul's poetry, it is the Gospel in concentrated form.

Christ Jesus was in the form of God. He is true God, equal with the Father: not climbing toward deity, not stealing it. He did not count that equality a thing to be grasped, clutched, exploited. He emptied Himself, not by subtracting His divinity, as if the Son stopped being God, but by taking. He emptied Himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. Found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

The doctor on the floor still goes home a doctor. Christ goes all the way to the bottom. Not a noble death. A cursed death. A slave's death. The One before whom every knee will bow first hangs where no one wanted to look.

This is not first an example to imitate. This is first a Savior to receive. He did not come down so that you could climb up by your humility. He came down because you could not. He became obedient because you are not. He was poured out because you are full of yourself. His blood answers your rivalry. His cross answers your conceit. His empty tomb answers your death.

Then:

Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name.

Philippians 2:9, ESV

Humiliation, then exaltation. That path will be yours, but only because it was His first, for you.

WORKING OUT WHAT IS WORKED IN

Now Paul can say the line that frightens people:

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

Philippians 2:12, ESV

He immediately adds the reason:

For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

Philippians 2:13, ESV

This is not "save yourself." This is baptismal life. In Holy Baptism God put His name on you, drowned the old Adam, and gave you the Spirit. The mind of Christ is yours because Christ is yours. God works the willing. God works the doing. Your working out is the living out of what He has already worked in.

Fear and trembling is not terror that God might drop you. It is holy seriousness: the One who sat down in our dust now lives in you. Treat one another accordingly.

Now, what does this look like in a real congregation on a Tuesday? It looks like the council member who lets the other side win the argument about the furnace, not because he is right and gracious, but because Christ was right and gave Himself. It looks like the family that visits the shut in, not to be seen doing it, but because the One who visited us in our prison has set us free. It looks like the young person who gives up the Saturday to help the older member move, not for a thank you, but because he has been given a mind that counts another more significant than himself.

And here is the hard part, the part we would rather skip. Paul says:

Do all things without grumbling or disputing.

Philippians 2:14, ESV

Grumbling is the native language of the old Adam. We grumble about the sermon, the budget, the other pew, the other party, the weather, the pastor, the people who used to sit there. Grumbling is how a congregation that has been given the Word of life sounds like every other crooked generation. It is not that grumbling is a big sin. It is that grumbling is the small, daily way we refuse the mind of Christ. We have been given a Word of life, and we answer with a word of complaint.

But you are not left to fight that battle alone.

It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

Philippians 2:13, ESV

The same God who knelt down in the form of a servant now kneels down in you by His Spirit. He works the willing. He works the doing. Your working out is simply the living out of what He has already worked in. Fear and trembling is not terror that God might drop you. It is holy seriousness: the One who sat down in our dust now lives in you. Treat one another accordingly.

Think about the last time you were wronged in this church. Not a big betrayal, a small one. A slight. A word that stung. Your instinct was to keep score, to make sure they knew. That instinct is the old Adam, alive and well, and it will eat your congregation from the inside if you let it. But the mind of Christ does not keep score. It was counted against Him on the cross, so that it would never be counted against you. When you forgive the small wrong, you are not being nice. You are living out what was already done for you. You are shining, not by effort, but by the Light that lives in you.

LIGHTS IN A CROOKED GENERATION

Why does this matter beyond the parking lot? Paul says:

So that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life.

Philippians 2:15-16, ESV

You do not become lights by straining. You are lights because the Light of the world has taken you. The world does not need a church that is impressive. It needs a church that is crucified and raised: people who do not grab, who serve, who hold fast the Word and hold it forth.

Holding fast and holding forth are the same verb in Greek. Cling to the Word here, in preaching, in the Sacrament of Christ's body and blood, in the promises spoken over you, and that same Word is what you carry into the darkness. The light is not your personality. The light is Jesus, confessed, eaten and drunk, lived.

Paul even speaks of being poured out like a drink offering. Your life, spent in ordinary faithfulness, is caught up into Christ's offering. And then he says, twice: rejoice. Joy is not the prize for getting humility right. Joy is the fruit of knowing that the One who humbled Himself for you is now Lord of all.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 2:5, ESV

You will not find it in the mirror. You will find it where He still comes down: in the Word that empties you of excuses and fills you with Him; in the water that named you; in the Supper where the exalted Lord still gives Himself under humble forms of bread and wine.

He was in the form of God. He took the form of a servant. He is now the name above every name. And He has put that name on you.

So come. Hold fast the Word of life. And then go, not as people trying to shine, but as children of God in whom God Himself is at work, until every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Pastor Ron Breight

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