

Palm Sunday, April 14, 2019

Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift

"What Was He Thinking?"

THE INTRODUCTION TO THE READING

The Apostle Paul is writing the church in Philippi from prison, and his fate is unknown. It is obvious that this congregation is special to him and concerned for him. He is eager to connect with *them*, but has had to do so through emissaries, and now through a letter.

The Philippian church is a generous congregation and healthy; they have generally worked well together to spread and to live the gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, in his letter, Paul often lists their virtues.

In between the lines, however, we sense that Paul is addressing some brewing tension. It may be that the Philippians are trying to be church within a larger, hostile, political environment. It may be an internal difference of opinion. He doesn't name a particular issue, or the decision that has some of the members at odds with each other, but he incorporates verses of what was probably a well-known Christian hymn in order to focus them on Jesus Christ. Paul knows that the mind of Christ will steer them in the right direction and lead them forward with boldness and in unity.

THE READING - Philippians 2:1-8

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was* in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

SERMON

When we served the Protestant Church in Paris, France, we were privileged to meet a Catholic nun named Sister Francoise Demeure. As we got acquainted, she told us about her former ministry in Vietnam. When it was still a French colony, with her religious order, Francoise volunteered to live the Gospel among the Montagnards – the indigenous people of the Highlands. She remained with them through the Vietnam War.

Francoise recounted how during one terrible period, the villagers had to retreat every night for the trenches in order to survive the bombings from both sides of the conflict. The following morning, they would return to rebuild their homes, but the cycle continued.

It was extremely dangerous to serve there. **What was she thinking?!**

Francoise' story reminds me of others: Albert Schweitzer, giving up his comforts to start the Lambarene Hospital in what is now Gabon, Africa; Dietrich Bonhoeffer returning to Germany, his home country, from the safety of the U.S., just as Hitler was expanding his Third Reich; those firefighters who ran *into* the Towers on 9/11 as others escaped; and all those special needs runners, wheelchair racers, and cancer survivors who have signed up for the Boston Marathon no matter the risk or the weather! **All of these people, what were they thinking?!**

We wonder the same thing about Jesus as he decided to go up to Jerusalem almost three years into his mission. Maybe he reasoned that the city would be won over by the crowds that welcomed him with palms and cloaks. I suppose it was possible that the authorities would turn toward the good news of the Reign of God. But knowing the twisted propensities of human nature – how we so often look to our own interests instead of those of others, always doing things from selfish ambition, grasping after God's power, and forever afraid of dying – well, when Jesus elected to enter the Holy City, it was much more likely that conflict and a cross awaited him. Yet, he went there. **What was going on in his mind? What was he thinking?!**

It turns out that asking "What was Jesus thinking?" is absolutely the best question the church can ask, not only today at the beginning of Holy Week, but every day! In order to function with courage and unity in every age, the Church and Christians must organically connect to Jesus Christ and become aligned with his thinking.¹

The Greek word for "mind," a form of which is used over and over again in Paul's letter to the Philippians, means to have understanding and to be mentally disposed or oriented in a

¹Morna D. Hooker, "Philippians," *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 500.

certain way. Strong's commentary says that it is "difficult to translate this word into English because it combines the visceral *and* the cognitive aspects of thinking."²

As far as Christianity is concerned, and this was Paul's advice to the church at Philippi, **the Body of Christ needs the Mind of Christ in order to move adroitly and according to his will.** Otherwise, the Body will be disjointed, at odds, inefficient, and ineffective. Paul writes, "Have this mind (singular) among yourselves (plural). Think what Jesus was thinking."³

In order to figure out what Jesus was thinking and to answer this most important question, fortunately the church does not need to learn the Vulcan Mind-Meld from *Star Trek*, as if we ever could. **The Holy Spirit has been given to us for the purpose of discernment in our particular contexts and situations. But in general, the guiding mantra in Jesus' thinking is loving service.**

As verse 7 of our reading states, "Christ took the form of a slave (or servant). The Greek word is "doulos," and *in the New Testament*, this is actually a dignified state. As a faith term, it does not invoke the history of chattel slavery in the U.S.; it is *not* a word that connotes denigration, inferiority, lack of selfhood, or false modesty. "Doulos," here, refers to "someone who belongs to another," but *willingly* – willingly – and with devotion.⁴

When Philippians says that Christ didn't exploit the authority of God, but emptied himself, as a *doulos*, it means that he chose to serve the greater, mysterious purposes of God! He came to *us* after all! In the form of a servant, he went where light, peace, and love were most needed. The fourth vow of Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity, for example, is to give "whole-hearted, free service to the poorest of the poor."⁵ This sounds like the mind of Christ.

It was my honor to get to know the Christian Church of Wilkesburg, PA, a congregation that seeks to be the welcoming people of God in the midst of an inner city community beset by street violence, drug addiction, and many forms of mental illness.

One Sunday, a visitor to worship experienced an unexpected psychotic break, throwing the proceedings into chaos, but with their commitment and training, the deacons of the church were able to de-escalate the situation and get him to the help he needed. The pastor later concluded: "It could have been so much worse had this happened elsewhere in town; I was glad that he came to church that Sunday, because *here* he was met with love." **This sounds like a servant church, exercising the mind of Christ!**

²The Greek word is "phroneo," from the root "phren." Strong's online reference at biblehub.com.

³Fred Craddock, *Philippians, Interpretation Commentary* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 36.

⁴Strong's online resource again.

⁵Muggeridge, *Mother Teresa Speaks* (1971), 105, 113.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, he wasn't thinking, "Hey, I can be a celebrity!" He wasn't concerned with acclaim and popularity. His entry was not a strategy to quickly recruit more disciples, or to gain power, but another opportunity to think God's thoughts and serve God's purposes as he had been doing from the beginning, across the entire arc of his earthly existence. You see, holding this goal, **Jesus always knew where to go; he went where love was most needed.**

So I believe that this is what he was thinking when he went to the corrupt religious council and the cynical Pilate. "Love is needed here." To the Roman enemies that tortured him, he extended love. Jesus returned to his own followers when they had fainted for fear and failed him. Jesus always went in service where love was most needed, even to the cross.

In his poem, Laurence Housman captures Jesus' thoughts:

Love looked down and beheld Hatred.

"I will go there," said Love.