

June 1, 2014 - Mind of Christ
Philippians 2:1-13

“Think--and act--like Jesus does.”

If you were here last week, you probably remember that this letter Paul writes to the Philippians is just full of affection and thanksgiving for their partnership in the Gospel and that I tried to re-create the experience of hearing this letter by delivering my own letter of thanksgiving.

That was chapter one. Don't be fooled by chapter numbers. The New Testament wasn't divided up into chapters until about a thousand years ago, long after Paul wrote his letters. Chapter 2 doesn't start a new thought. Paul continues his affection and thanksgiving. And it leads him to a big ask. His big ask is, “Make my day.” No! That's, “make my joy complete. You are so far advanced in this Gospel life I think you're ready to take the final step; finish what you started and be complete.” The Greek word for “complete” would be “perfect,” which doesn't mean without flaw or sinless or anything like that. It means done, finished, arrived.

What would make Paul's joy complete? It would be if the Philippians were able to have the mind of Christ in their life together, if they were able to think and act like Jesus in their day to day living with each other.

That's a BIG ask. But it's one Paul would like to make of every follower of Jesus. Here's what I mean: if you were to ask an American Christian, “What does salvation mean?” there's a pretty good chance that the answer you'd get back would be something like, “Getting into heaven.” How to get into heaven seems to be a preoccupation among American Christians.

If you asked that question about what salvation means in other parts of the world, you'd likely get different answers. In Africa you might get an answer that included being connected to the power of God which will help fight off all the demonic forces which surround me in this life and the next. If you ask an Eastern Orthodox Christian about salvation you'd likely get an answer that included being in union with God.

And if you asked Paul about salvation you'd get an answer that included being transformed into the likeness of Christ. Rom. 12: “Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” 2 Cor. 3: “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image.” And then there are the nine places where Paul asks his hearers to imitate Jesus or imitate him because he imitates Jesus. And so here, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” Catch that? Paul isn't asking us to just get along by being like-minded; he is asking us to have the mind of Jesus. Let me say that again another way: Paul isn't giving some practical advice on keeping the peace. Paul is saying this is how we work our salvation. Paul is saying that the way we relate to one another directly affects our relationship with God.

Luther, by the way, called this being little Christs for each other. What Paul is asking us to do for each other is to empty ourselves the way Jesus emptied himself in becoming human. Like I said,

this is a BIG ask, a hard step and one which we may never do perfectly. But it's the next step for those who are becoming spiritually mature.

What might such an emptying look like? It might look like the relationship in a good marriage when it is at its best, when each partner is continually giving up her or himself for the other. It might look like a whole network of emotionally intimate, caring, and responsible relationships that draw us into the inner life of God because the whole point of the doctrine of the Trinity is not how one God can be in three persons but how the three persons of the Trinity are constantly giving up themselves for each other thus producing life, love, and salvation.

This emptying inevitably will lead to some people being hurt because they have made themselves vulnerable. We should expect this; look what happened to Jesus. He emptied himself and made himself subject to the forces of sin and death, and those forces put him to death.

This kind of vulnerable self-emptying leads to unity. Not uniformity—even if we could be fully perfect in this self-emptying, we'd all be still be the quirky individuals we are now. But we would also be even more fully united, because the trust level among us would be super high. And therefore, our trust of God would be super high. The relationships we have with each other directly affect our relationship with God.

Paul called this having the mind of Christ. Thomas a Kempis called it the imitation of Christ. Martin Luther called it being a little Christ for each other. And St. Francis of Assisi spoke of it this way. He said that a habitual inner attentiveness toward Christ, reflecting on his life and death, holding him before our awareness, can so form and shape us that even in the face of hostility we become vessels of God's compassionate love for others. This love is the root of true joy.

Does this sound foolish? Well, yeah, what did you expect of a faith that makes claims about eternal life in the name of a crucified prophet?