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“Mind-fullness”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 25, 2011

Exodus 17:1–7; Philippians 2:1–13; Matthew 21:23–32

This is going to be a sermon about thinking,

which Presbyterians should like because we consider ourselves
to be people who value the life of the mind.

It's going to be about filling our minds full of Christ-like thoughts,

about wrapping our brains around Christ-like perspectives,

about putting on the thinking cap of Christ before we act.

I've been reading a great deal about “mindfulness” lately,

and one Harvard scholar, Ellen Langer, says that mindfulness is not
about practice making perfect

and not about something done repetitively until thinking is no longer required

and not about tuning out the voices of doubt.

Rather, mindfulness, from Langer's psychological perspective, is about five things:

an openness to novelty, an alertness to distinction, a sensitivity to different contexts,

an awareness of multiple perspectives, and an orientation to the present.

(Ellen Langer. *The Power of Mindful Learning*, p. 23)

And so, since this is a sermon about thinking,

I want us to be mindful of what it might mean to have the same mind

that was in Christ Jesus,

to fill our minds with Christ-like thinking.

And I will guide us by telling three vignettes...

Vignette #1 – Entering the glass doors of the downtown YMCA

at 6:30 a.m. in our usual state of somnolent stupor,
my husband and I notice a shopping cart parked just to our left
fluffy-full and overflowing
with bags of clothes, food, books, drinking bottles and aluminum cans.
It resembles an organic cell on the verge of mitosis,
prepared to double, triple in size right before our very eyes.

“I’ve seen that cart before,” I tell my husband,
“it belongs to the homeless lady down in Durham Central Park:
a lone, bright urban trekker.”

But I don’t see her there – the lady – who usually pushes the cart.

We amble in to the registration desk to swipe our Y cards
when the usually chipper receptionist unloads her lament on us:

“She’s in here somewhere, but I don’t know where she went.

I only let her in because she asked for a drink of water,
and now she’s gone.

And I’m the only one here and can’t leave to go find her.”

The receptionist returns our cards and hands us fresh towels
before continuing her solemn song:

“She comes here a lot and asks for water,
asks to leave her bags outside and have us watch them while she comes in.

I think she might be a little crazy.

You know there should be a place to lock up people like that, but there’s not.
People here at the Y – they pay to belong –
they don’t want to be harassed by people like that.

But what are you going to do?

I’m just trying to put on the mind of Christ, you know.

I’m just trying to put on the mind of Christ and do the right thing.”

I really appreciated the receptionist’s transparency so early in the morning

that she would so openly share her inner struggle with us,
let us see what guides her thoughts and actions, and the tension therein.
And frankly, I was moved by the earnest witness of this African-American woman,
as Jesus figured so prominently in her decision-making,
and that she actively sought a higher perspective
when she was put on the spot like this.
I'm not sure that I would have made that move so quickly,
used Christ-mindfulness so early in the process, if at all,
reached deep within for God's power and wisdom to help me cope.
But she did, and she started me thinking about being mindful of Christ,
having the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, putting on the mind of Christ,
and what that might mean.

In Paul's letter to the church at Philippi and his exhortation for Christian unity
through mutual Christ-mindedness,
Paul appeals to me because his teaching is not gender, class, ethnic, or
economically restrictive.

Anyone can wrap his or her brain around the mind of Christ
because it is a matter of inner orientation, of being, of identity,
of cause that then produces the effect of Christ-likeness.

Theologian Dan Migliore comments on Paul's exhortation thusly:

"The point of the Apostle Paul's appeal to his readers to have the mind of Christ
is to let their minds be transformed by the revelation of God in Christ
rather than by being conformed to the ways of thinking and living
characteristic of worldly powers.

In John Calvin's striking metaphor," Migliore notes, "the biblical witness to revelation
is like a pair of spectacles that enable us to see God, the world, and ourselves
in a radically new manner."

(Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.6.1 as quoted by Daniel Migliore in *Faith Seeking Understanding*, p. 23)

This is what I observed in the receptionist at the Y that morning:

stopping, pausing, emptying herself of *her* thoughts and feelings,
and putting on the spectacles of Christ to allow herself to see
and to let her actions flow from a different and higher perspective and
in a radically new manner.

I wonder if anyone paused to put on the spectacles of Christ before two inmates
from death row were executed this week, or is justice really blind?

Being mindful of Christ, being full of the mind of Christ,

having the same mind that was in Christ Jesus involves looking at a situation,
perhaps, from a new perspective, through new lenses and then responding
to what one sees.

Vignette #2 – A teenage boy throws his new book bag into the window of his jeep,
climbs in through the door, and heads off to a nearby high school for day one,
the transition day between the end of outdoor summer soccer,
camping, fishing, swimming, and the beginning of indoor study,
time with friends, and after-school work.

There's only one hitch: the young boy has not thought through the transition,
and there's a pocket knife carelessly wedged between the windshield
and the dashboard of his jeep.

He had used it as a tool to cut line when fish were schooling yesterday;
now, today at his own schooling, it will be considered an illegal weapon.

When they call him to the principal's office early in the morning of that first day,
he's clueless – worried, even, that something might be wrong at home,
something amiss with a family member.

When they cite him with a violation for possession of a weapon on school property,
and suspend him for 11 days, he's heartsick.

He didn't mean to endanger anyone. It was an oversight, a stupid mistake:
leaving yesterday's cleaning tool in today's student transport.

He's an average student as it is; to miss the first 11 days of school will be detrimental.
What will his family think of him? His friends?

His church finds out and wants to support him.

He's a good kid who comes to youth group on a regular basis.

So they, the pastors and youth pastor, seek the mind of Christ together,
to discern an appropriate response to this student and his family
in this humiliating and tragic situation.

They decide to attend his hearing before the school board's disciplinary council,
and witness to his good character: be there with him at his trial,
be there for him after his trial, be an affirming presence in an
admonishing atmosphere, not leave him and his family alone.

The disciplinary council hears his case and upholds his sentence:

11 days of suspension, as is standard school board policy.

But the youth has been heard and has been upheld by his faith community.

Discipline has been applied, but so has discipleship,
and I can't help but hope he has learned something about both in this situation.

Theologian Shirley Guthrie says of this passage in Philippians:

"Just when we take the Bible seriously, we discover that it hardly ever speaks of faith
without corresponding obedience, of theology without corresponding ethics...

That is the first thing we have to emphasize.

There is no such thing as Christian faith without Christian life.

Christian faith does not free us *from* but *for* Christian action.

God does not forgive, accept and love us *on condition that* we become righteous,
but God does forgive, accept and love us *in order that* we may become righteous."

(Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, p. 334)

The kenotic nature of Christ in Paul's Christ hymn empties itself

and makes a gracious nod of time, energy, and affirmation on behalf of others.

It suffers the surrender of its own control, reputation, schedule, agenda, and outcome,
to embrace the passion of others, other neighbors, other sheep, other
real life happenings, and brings to others, at all cost,
encouragement, consolation, love, fellowship, and joy.

To possess the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, to me, is to uphold others

with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength – whatever it takes.
The great Mohandas Gandhi once made the statement, “I like your Christ.
I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are unlike your Christ.”
Gandhi said this in the midst of his struggles for peace and justice
during the foreign occupation of his native India.
Does adopting the same mind that was in Christ Jesus lead us
to righteous actions and ethics that reflect the mind of Christ,
or does it just lead us to self-righteousness?

Vignette #3 – Did you happen to catch the video clip this past week
of the 24-year old motorcyclist in Utah who slid his bike into an on-coming vehicle
and became trapped under the burning chassis?
I watched it over and over again,
each time moved to tears by the amazing group—
think of the motley collection of bystanders who happened upon the scene.
As the front of the vehicle bursts into flames, one bends down to peer under the car
to check on the on the young man at risk of losing his life.
Two and three come forward from the crowd
and try to nudge the BMW, rock it back and forth, as it continues to burn brightly.
Four, five, six – nine jump in to help,
to throw a shoulder into the car, to dig fingers underneath the hot metal bumper,
to tilt it sideways, to push from behind those who are laying hands
on the car.
And as the car miraculously begins to tilt onto two wheels, temporarily teetering,
still aflame, one brave soul reaches under the car and grabs the unconscious victim
by the arm and drags him clear of the danger.
Did they know the young victim? No!
Did they know one another at that moment? No!
Were they strong enough to lift a 3,800 pound car? No – the math plays out
to the equivalent of lifting 422 pounds apiece!
Did they seek the mind of Christ? I doubt if they even had time!

Was the mind of Christ made manifest through them? Yes – I think so,
in the empathetic, selfless, self-giving, serving, sacrificial, life-giving,
rescuing, saving, miraculous surge of strength and energy
on behalf of another human being.

Sometimes *we seek* the mind of Christ, and sometimes *it finds us*, and we bear witness
to its astonishing presence among the sheep and goat world of ordinary people.

He, Jesus, emptied himself,
taking the form of a servant.

He, Jesus, humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of losing his life.

Theologian Shirley Guthrie, again, in noting the mind-set of Christ's church in this world:

"There is a sense in which the true nature of the church is indeed invisible.

There is no external proof that God is uniquely present and at work
in this very ordinary group of people—

just as there is no proof that God was uniquely present and at work
in a Jew named Jesus.

As with Jesus, so it is with the church;

we cannot see but only believe that it is so.

Yet, as in Jesus, so in his body, the church,

God works in a very this-worldly, visible way...

... The world may not be able to see why it is so,

but it ought to be able to see that in and among all the churches

gathered in the name of Jesus, there are present the fruits of the Spirit."

(Shirley Guthrie. *Christian Doctrine*, p. 360)

Author Diane Ackerman notes that in the ancient language of Sanskrit,

the root meaning of the word *mantra* is a combination

of the prefix *man*, which means "to think" or "to have in mind"

and the suffix *tra*, which means "tool" or "instrument."

(Diane Ackerman. *Dawn Light*, p. 56)

A mantra, then, is a tool or instrument, a thinking cap, to help us
think mindfully and act appropriately in present real-world circumstances.
So, perhaps, this should be our daily mantra:

“Let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus.”

“Let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus.” Amen.