

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-26  
Philippians 2:5-11

Palm/Passion Sunday  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
April 14, 2019

## **The Mind of Christ**

### *Introduction to the Psalm*

Our Psalm for this Palm Sunday is the last in the series of the so-called Egyptian Hallel Psalms. Together they retell the story of the Exodus in the language of praise and thanksgiving. It's a public psalm in which the psalmist not only speaks to the community, but also invites its response. The gathering is poised at the entrance of worship, and as the psalmist bids the gates be opened, we can envision the people passing through. Listen to these words from Psalm 118:1-2 and 19-26...

### *Introduction to the Epistle*

Our Epistle for today is taken from Paul's Letter to the Church in Philippi. Known as the Christological hymn, our lesson is the quintessential passage illustrating the humility of Jesus, namely, his disregard of his divine status and his sacrifice of self. Paul tells the church that we are to be of the same mind. Listen to these words from Philippians 2:5-11...

### *Sermon*

The Apostle Paul had a great love for the members of the church in Philippi. His letter to the Philippians is the most tender and gracious of all his letters in the New Testament. There are some who have thought that Paul wrote this letter to express his appreciation for the gift of money that the Philippian Church had gathered and sent by Epaphroditus to Paul in prison. But that may not be the main purpose. For Paul has already thanked the Philippians and in *this* letter simply mentions again their thoughtfulness in sending him the gift.

If thanking them was not the main purpose of this beautiful little letter, what then was it? As we said, Paul loved the Philippians and was deeply concerned about their well-being. And he has learned that somehow a rift has developed and the church has become divided. It was not a matter of doctrinal disputes as it was in Galatia and Corinth. Rather, there were personality conflicts, prejudices, and personal animosities which were causing trouble in Philippi. The church was being broken into little groups or cliques. Rather than working together to fulfill the great work to which they had been called, they were bickering among themselves. So Paul pleads with them to put away divisiveness, self-centeredness, and personal ambition.

In the fourth chapter of this letter we meet two women: Euodia and Syntyche. But unfortunately, all we are told there about them is that they quarreled. What a sad way for history to remember someone, what a tragedy for two lives to be summed up in one sentence—“They quarreled.” From his gentle rebuke it is evident that these two women were dear to Paul; it is also obvious that they were active and leading members of the church and probably had been from the time it was established. Paul asks another member of the church to help these two settle their quarrel.

How thoughtless people can be, even when it is their own fellow countrymen’s lives that are at stake. We face it today with aggressive drivers and road rage. “Get out of my way. You’re slowing me down. How dare you!” How divisive, not to mention unchristian, people can be when it comes to political differences.

This self-centered attitude can manifest itself in a Christian who thinks he knows everything and always knows what’s best or that he is just a cut above other Christians. They see a speck in the eye of someone else, but fail to see the beam in their own eye. (Mt. 7:5)

There's an old Irish folktale about a woman who had the reputation of being very holy. She never missed a worship service. She not only attended church every Sunday morning, but also every midweek service and special seasonal services as well.

One day a friend asked her, "How many times a year do you attend worship? I would think the number is close to one hundred." Intrigued with the question, the woman decided to keep track. She built a wooden box, locked it, and hid the key where no one could find it. Each time she returned home from worship, she placed a pebble in the box. Whenever she came home from church, she never forgot to put a pebble in the box.

As the years passed, the woman began to wonder if the box was getting too heavy to lift. So she asked a strong man who lived in her town to help her carry the box outside. "Be careful," she said. "It is very heavy." The man picked up the box effortlessly and said, "Your box is very light. I don't think you'll need my help in moving it."

Quickly, the woman found her key and opened the box. She looked inside and found only five stones. She stood speechless, gazing into the almost empty box. Well, after some time, the woman walked to church and told the pastor her story. "It doesn't seem possible that someone has stolen the pebbles out of my box," she said. "It was locked, secured, and the key was hidden."

The wise pastor spoke kindly to the woman:

"Your box tells us that when you attended worship, God has not been central in your mind and your neighbors have not been central in your prayers. It is clear that most of the time you were thinking about how pious and holy you were, and how everyone ought to know how devoted you have been to the church. This is a sign from heaven that only five times have you entered worship with a heart turned to God. True worship does not consist in the number of times we enter a building."

Now it was because of this spirit of self-centeredness, boasting, arrogance, rivalry, and self-exaltation that Paul says to the Philippians:

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.  
 And being found in human form,  
 he humbled himself  
 and became obedient to the point of death—  
 even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:5-8)

Palm Sunday is a triumphant day in the life of the church. But it also marks the day that Christ headed into Jerusalem and toward his crucifixion. Jesus was obedient and humble, riding on a borrowed donkey. The earthly life of Jesus began in a manger—a feeding trough for animals. It would end on a cross between two thieves.

Of course, it is well that we celebrate Palm Sunday—a wonderful day of palm branches and alleluias. But we also recognize Passion Sunday today. Passion Sunday begins a sharper focus upon the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the central event of the Christian Faith. So we have this paradox as we enter into Holy Week. On Palm Sunday, we celebrate the joyful entry of Christ into Jerusalem. We have all of the pomp and circumstance of a great parade. The triumphant entry is greeted with “Hosannas!” However, this royal ride will lead to crucifixion and death, and burial.

There are those who have gathered in Jerusalem, in the center of the Roman-occupied city, to welcome Jesus as he makes his entry. Up to this point, Jesus' followers have listened to him. They have questioned him. They have tried to understand him. And, indeed, they have

followed him. For three years Jesus has traveled around Galilee proclaiming the Good News of God's reconciling love. And people have been healed. Lives have been changed.

But now, as he sets his face to Jerusalem, the drama increases. His followers are emboldened. They are ready to make a public statement. They are ready to tell the power structures of this world—to tell Caesar, and anyone who will listen: This Jesus who is entering Jerusalem "is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" But as Jesus came near and sees the city, he weeps over Jerusalem, saying,

“If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.” (Lk. 19:41-42)

So begins the passion of Christ. We hear the story of Jesus being handed over to the authorities. Peter denies he even knows him. And the same crowd that welcomed Jesus now yells “crucify him!”

The reality of Palm Sunday is that in the wake of Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem, he had already set his sights on the cross. And he has now less than one week to live as Jesus of Nazareth. He could have “saved himself.” But with all humility he chose the path of faithful obedience to the Heavenly Father.

And in our Epistle notice that Paul sees the humility of Christ not just in the fact that he became obedient unto death, *but even to death on a cross*. Jesus suffered the physical agony of crucifixion, and also the humiliation of death upon a cross, between two thieves.

There may be some who object that Paul’s comparison between Christ’s giving up his deity and the selfish ambition of some people in the Philippian Church is entirely unjustified. Surely the personal quarrels could have been dealt with by a just few wise and gentle words of reproof from the Apostle. It is unnecessary to bring in the example of Christ at this point. However to object in this way is to miss the whole point he is trying to make. For Paul is

making clear that in Christianity the *attitude* is all-important and that the Christian attitude is to be the attitude of Christ. “Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus.” Have this mind...Don’t just concentrate on your own interests, but let each be equally concerned for the interests of others. Think about how Christ had come not to be served, but to serve. Think about how our Lord was willing to stoop and wash the feet of his disciples.

In his life Christ demonstrated an attitude of utter self-forgetfulness. He lived a life that was perfectly free of personal ambition. He could have called on God to send a legion of angels. But he gave up his life for us and our salvation. He emptied himself, took the form of a servant, willing to die even as a common criminal on a cross—the most terrible and shameful of deaths.

Paul thus presents us with two portraits of Christ: the portrait of Christ in the very nature of God, the Christ who might have dared to grasp the authority of God; and the portrait of Christ as he chose to be in obedience to God, the Christ who abandoned everything that he might possess and exchanged the form of God for the form of man.

Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:9-11)

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.