

5 February 2017, the 5th Sunday after the Epiphany
Isaiah 58:1-12; 1 Corinthians 2:1-16; Matthew 5:13-20
St. Michael's Church, Norman, Oklahoma

From American poet Edwin Markham: *Outwitted*

“He drew a circle that shut me out--
Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!”

This morning St. Paul writes to the Corinthians and uses many images of circles on the ground, lines in the sand, oppositions of one thing to another. “Wisdom” and “Foolishness”; “things of this age” and “things of eternity, from before all ages” (From “before the Boom”, we might say); things and people who are “spiritual” (of the Spirit) and things and people who are “natural”, that is, unaware, unenlightened, not yet perceiving.

But, Paul says, “We have the mind of Christ.”

Here he plunges into very deep waters, for this is a remarkable claim, and one that has been used to justify all sorts of nonsense over the centuries.

What is this, to have the mind of Christ?

Elsewhere, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul unpacks this concept a bit. He writes, quoting from another, older source: “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)

That is to say, the mind (or awareness, or consciousness) of Christ does not exploit, or cling, or seek to manipulate. It is a releasing of the will to power, of attempt to influence, of any effort to “rule the roost” in any way, even to the point of consenting to physical death. And it is in this consenting, even to what seems (to all common sense and worldly wisdom) to be the end of everything, that the power and potency and rule of God is itself released, set loose in the world, to act and restore and create anew.

This consciousness of consent does not, by the way, mean being passive or a doormat. To imagine that the only available options are to either seize and brandish power, or to be helpless and powerless, is to betray the very “either-or” thinking that Paul, and Jesus, and all the prophets (on their better days at least) are constantly pushing against. Such either-or thinking is useful and necessary, but it is insufficient in itself.

In the gospel this morning, Jesus tells his hearers that “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom.” This does not mean doing more good deeds than other people; it does not mean having more faith, or believing more correct theology.

Both Jesus' opponents and his followers, for the most part, got tripped up over either-or categories. "Us" and "Them." "Worthy" and "undeserving." "True Believer" and "Heretic."

Again, these are useful, even needful, ways of organizing and cataloging information in daily life. But such catalogs and categories are not enough. They will not lead us into the way of Christ. They will not open us to the mind of Christ.

To have what Paul calls "the mind of Christ" is to be immersed in, and existentially changed by, a new awareness of all that is—reality in its wholeness. Jesus embodied and modeled this awareness throughout his life, and the prophets and sages of all the centuries (on their better days) have understood this awareness. It is to be converted at the deepest level of our being—to be "metanoia-ed" into a whole new experience of all of life. Right now, where we are, as we are. It's what Jesus calls "the kingdom of heaven."

Episcopal priest, retreat leader and writer Cynthia Bougeault puts it well, when she calls it "...a permanent, irreversible shift in the seat of selfhood and in the perceptual field that flows out from this new identity. The former, nucleated sense of selfhood dissolves, and in its place there arises a capacity to live a flowing, unboundaried life in which the person becomes "oned" with God (as Julian of Norwich famously expressed it) and oned with one's neighbor, flowing in the fundamental matrix of love without need for either edges or centers." (*The Heart of Centering Prayer: Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice*, p. 46)

Out of this capacity to live such a life come the resources to do all the good things that Isaiah points to this morning. Unlocking chains and instruments of bondage and oppression; sharing food and clothing and shelter with all; ceasing from fingerpointing and shaming and blaming; reaching out to those folks on the edge (both outsiders looking in, and insiders looking around, wondering if anyone sees them in their struggles.) Such good-doing is not about "earning merit badges" (my apologies to the Scouts), but about responding to the deep connectedness at the heart of the universe, revealed in every grain of sand, every blade of grass, every human soul.

Last week Deacon Laura reminded us that "If what we do in here does not challenge and effect what we do out there beyond those doors, out past the "Servants' Entrance" sign, then all this is merely an exercise."

Y'all, I hate exercise. I do.

But I love to go for walks.

I love to dance.

I love to swim.

I love to get out in the yard and dig and pull and prune and plant and make things look nice.

But I hate "exercise." Too many memories of middle school gym class, smelly adolescent feet and being the absolute last one to be picked for anything when teams got chosen. And Dodgeball.

Oh my god.

My former bishop in Georgia was a self-declared ex-jock, son of a football coach and of course he'd played football all through high school and I think in college. Once when I was miffed at him for the way he'd handled a situation in which I was involved, I said "Well, your people have been stuffing my people into lockers for several hundred years now, so I don't suppose I should have expected anything else."

But really, exercise of any kind is for a purpose. Strength and endurance, range of motion and flexibility, grace and skill and fluency in the time of testing. Whether it's in a gym or outside in the open air, at a piano keyboard or in a dance studio.

So yeah, what we do here under this roof, around this table, is exercise. We're training ourselves, our souls and bodies, in the motions and manners and skills of Jesus' followers.

We're training our ears, by listening to words that are thousands of years old, to which we respond: "The word of the Lord/Thanks be to God" as we seek to discover "What is God saying to us, now, in these ancient texts?" So that maybe when we go out those doors, we can hear God speaking in the midst of all the words we hear the rest of the time. What is "the word of the Lord", what is "The holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ" to a broken and hurting and beloved and God-breathed world out there? Are we listening?

We're training our eyes to see Christ among us—in a beautiful silver book that appears in our midst when we are gathered here, and leads us out at the end to be Christ's hands and feet; in a bit of bread and a sip of wine when we come to this table; in the faces of our companions who gather with us around this table—so that we can learn to see Christ out there, in the face of neighbor and stranger, the foreigner and the outsider, the troublemaker at work, even the person we most dislike in the world—we can see Christ in them because we have discovered how to see with Christ's eyes.

We're training our voices to speak the good news of God in Christ when we begin Sunday by Sunday: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God's people on earth." When we lift up in care and love those names and places and situations which we carry in heart and mind and cry "Lord, have mercy." When we sing words (some newly crafted; some dating back hundreds of years) and join ourselves with the great cloud of witnesses past, present, and yet to arrive, we learn how to speak of God's love and mercy and amazing grace out there, beyond the doors, among those who know nothing of that good news, and those who have perhaps heard of such a thing, but never seen it practiced in real life.

Sunday by Sunday, month after month after year after year, we come to this place, to practice, to rehearse, to exercise, to grow more and more into this way of life. To enter more deeply into "the mind of Christ." We are washed and anointed in Holy Baptism; we are fed with the very life of God in the bread and wine of Holy Communion; we receive the sacraments so that we may become the sacraments, the outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, the agents and conduits of the goodness of God into the world.

May it be so for us; may it be so among us. Today, and tomorrow, and all the days to come.