

On Changing Our Minds

PSALM 31:9-16

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11

MATTHEW 27:11-54

Two things make Holy Week interesting and problematic for people of faith. On the one hand, as we move from Palm Sunday to Easter, we know how the week ends. It ends in Easter astonishment, Easter fear, Easter joy, Easter new life. But on the other hand, we also know we cannot leap from Palm Sunday to Easter. We have to go day by day through the week of denial and betrayal to the Last Supper to arrest and trial and execution. That is the only road to Easter, and that is our work this week.

I.

The long Gospel narrative is about that week. Matthew moves from the trial before Pilate to the mocking by the soldiers to the long detailed account of Jesus on the cross. It may strike you as odd that our reading is not about “the triumphal entry” on Palm Sunday with all of those palm branches. But that is because people do not much go to church on Thursday or Friday, and so we have to get the whole story in today. The Matthew narrative brings us to the abyss with Jesus’ cry on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46) This is a moment of cosmic abandonment when Jesus is cut off from the life support of the Father. We linger there because Jesus dares to accuse the Father of infidelity and abandonment. There is no move in this story yet toward Easter, except the astonishing affirmation by the Roman soldier, one of the executioners. He said at the end of the story, “This man was God’s Son.” He said “This is the guy!” He must have thought, as he

recognized him, “What have we done?” Because the empire is always executing and eliminating those sent by God who are judged to be too dangerous and too subversive.

II.

But the narrative account is hyped by Paul who in Philippians quotes the most treasured, most pivotal hymn that was sung in the early church. It is a lyrical recital of Jesus’ life and death. At the outset the hymn characterizes Jesus in the most exalted way as “in the form of God.” But then second, it moves quickly to say that Jesus willingly and readily surrendered equality with God. He made himself vulnerable in human form and became obedient. He became an obedient human person and because of his passion for God’s will for him, he collided with the will and purpose of the Roman Empire and with the Jews who colluded with the empire. He is not crucified because of some theory of the atonement. He is crucified because the empire cannot tolerate such a transformative, subversive force set loose in the world. Jesus’ uncompromising commitment to the purpose of God contradicted the empire that lives against the grain of God’s intention.

Then there is a pause in the poetry. It is a pause over Saturday. And then the hymn continues, “Therefore . . .” Consequently, as a result of his obedience . . . God has highly exalted. God has given him Easter honor and dominion and power as the Lord of the creation, as the ruler of all creation. This is indeed the “Fairest Lord Jesus, ruler of all nature.” And we worship him!

The church recites this lyrical poetry of his *equality with God* . . . that he *emptied himself* in obedience . . . and then *exalted in honor*. This is the move from Palm Sunday through Friday emptiness to Sunday glory. It is the story of our faith and the work of this week.

III.

But there is a surprise in the letter of Paul. We move from the Matthew narrative to the lyrical hymn; both are all about Jesus. Except that in Philippians, Paul introduces the hymn with this preface:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 2:5)

Have the same opinion that Jesus did. Then he describes the mind or the opinion of Jesus who emptied himself in obedience. Paul says to the church,

be like that, think like that, have a mind like that, have a sense of self in the world like that. Think of yourselves in the way that Christ thought of himself.

And then, as a lead-in to the hymn, Paul teaches the church what that “same mind” would be like:

Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. (vv. 2–4)

Paul summons the church and its members to exhibit in their common life the self-emptying that is congruent with Jesus. Paul knew about churches and about church people and the way we tend to act, concerned for self and our pet ideas and our intentions and our vested interests that bruise other people. And he said, do not look to your own interests.

So imagine the church, in this week of Friday and Sunday, in this drama of humiliation and exaltation, getting a new mind, a new opinion, a new readiness, a new heart in which church people do not pursue their own interests, but look to the interests of others:

The old for the young and the young for the old,
The wealthy for the poor and the poor for the wealthy,
Liberals for conservatives and conservatives for liberals,
Gays for straights and straights for gays,
The included for the excluded, and on and on.

IV.

I assume you are enough like me for me to say this. This would require on our part a big change of mind, a renewed mind, a different opinion than the one we “normally” have. The mind we usually have, the mind that reflects the values and passions and fears of our society,

Is to have our way as the only way,
Is to exercise control,
Is to be endlessly on the make,
Is to imagine that those unlike us are a threat to us.

As a result the church becomes a mirror of the world in which we live.

The world in which we live, the world of self-serving preoccupation and greedy accumulation and fearful tensions and divisions is premised on a rat-race of competition, on the turmoil of ruthless individualism, and the

collection of commodities, of rude social interaction and crude survival shows and toxic public life. And Paul says to the church, do not be so mindless. Do not be like sheep that imitate the world. Do not act like fearful citizens of the Roman Empire or of the American empire. Paul calls the church to be deeply and intentionally different. Paul does not do that so that the church can be the snug, comfortable happy place in town. Rather Paul intends that the church should be an exhibit to the world how our common life can be ordered differently, of rich and poor, gay and straight, liberal and conservative, even when we come to the great public questions of welfare and health and education and housing. All of that requires a different mind of obedience. The community gathered around Jesus is called to be as odd in the world as he himself was such an odd Messiah.

So here is my bid to you for Holy Week. As we walk the walk from Palm Sunday to Easter through the Thursday arrest and the Friday execution and the long Saturday wait in the void, imagine all of us, in the wake of Jesus, changing our minds, renewing our minds, altering our opinions concerning self and neighbor and world. The clue to the new mind of Christ is emptying of our need to control and our anxious passion for security. And as our minds change, we come to new freedom. It is Easter freedom, unburdened and fearless, freed for the interest of the neighbor. So we worship this Jesus who was dead and is alive, who was humbled and is exalted. But we also replicate his life in our own life. We find ourselves with Easter liberty to be our true selves as he himself was his true self. We know this very well: 'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free, 'tis a gift to come down where we ought to be. And where we ought to be is right next to him in self-emptying obedience.

April 17, 2011

Highland Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky