

SERMON FOR SEPTEMBER 27, 2020 (Deborah Wilson)

From the first grade through the 8<sup>th</sup>, I lived in a small paper mill town in northern Louisiana, so north it was almost Arkansas. The church my father pastored was quite conservative. I couldn't wear pants (even had to wear a wrap-around skirt over my gym shorts). And I couldn't go to movies. After we moved to Jackson, MS, the summer I turned 13, things loosened up a bit, reflecting the congregation's more liberal identity, but the movie issue was still enforced by my father. I do remember going to see some Billy Graham-sponsored films at actual cinemas (the tickets were free). There was always an altar call at the end and people down front to pray for any who responded. But, other than that, no, not even Disney movies. When one of my mother's favorite films, *GONE WITH THE WIND*, was rereleased to theaters, she convinced my father to let me go, because, "It will never be on television, and she needs to see it." So I went. I was 15. And I loved it. When it ended, they might as well have had an altar call, because I remember praying, asking God to make me more like Melanie Wilkes. Melanie was endlessly forgiving and tolerant and charitable and kind and, to me, Christlike. In spite of her close friend, Scarlett O'Hara, repeatedly and relentlessly trying to steal Melanie's husband, Ashley, away from her, Melanie always forgave and loved her. I knew I wasn't like that. But I wanted to be.

Many years later, I saw the film again and was amazed at my previous reaction, because now I admired Scarlett (not all her actions, of course) because of her intelligence, resilience, grit and tenacity. Just before the intermission, when, amid the apocalypse of the Yankee's devastation of the South, she finally gets back to her ruined home Tara, starving, she digs up a turnip with her bare hands and raises it to heaven, swearing, "As God is my witness, I will never go hungry again. No, nor any of my family." And she kept that oath. Of course, her means of achieving that goal were also part of that scene: "If I have to lie, steal, cheat, or kill." She is, even before the war, motivated by pure self-interest, and has a total lack of regard for others, even the family she pledges to feed—she is the antithesis of selflessness. As an aside, I admit that, during the isolation of these last months, I have become like Scarlett in one way: the ability to put off anything, unpleasant or otherwise, when I am able: "Fiddle-dee-dee. I'll think about that tomorrow." But, back to Melanie: my attitude has shifted yet again. I hadn't thought of the film in a long time, but when I read today's passage from Philippians, I thought of her and her seemingly Christlike life. I realized my model should have been the actual Christ instead of a woman whose husband seems to have been in the Klan, and that my approach to achieving Christlikeness wasn't right by any means.

Part of the focus in today's reading from Philippians is on community, the community of the church at Philippi, with whom Paul has a close relationship. They are loyal to him. He does not have to discipline them for any particular schism or heresy. In fact, he rejoices in them. His primary goal seems to be encouraging them in their representation of Christ to others. And in aiming at that goal, he exhorts them to be of the same mind, loving one another, being in full accord, and, he repeats, of one mind. What mind is that to be? In verse 5 he makes that clear: **LET THE SAME MIND BE IN YOU THAT WAS IN CHRIST JESUS.** There follows a summation of the pattern of

Christ's mind, illustrated in his life: he was in the form of God, equal to God in his divinity, and yet he emptied himself to become human, thereby humbling himself and becoming obedient even to his death on the cross. Central to the pattern of Christ's life is his humility. He divested himself of divinity, although he did not cease to be God, to humbly take on, as a garment, the likeness of humanity in obedience to God, and he followed that obedience to death on the cross for the sake of unworthy humanity.

Let me return to the concept of "the mind of Christ." What are we as Christians to do to have the mind of Christ in us as his followers, as his church, as his community that is to reflect his image to the world around us? Unlike Christ, we have no innate divinity to divest ourselves of. What we do have is a self that we must, as he did, empty. He emptied himself to become human, and as humans, we must empty ourselves to emulate him. What does that mean? In American culture, we idealize the self, individuality. Self-reliance is our mantra. Our cultural heroes are loners, not members of a community, even when their actions are on behalf of others. Shane rides in alone, saves the community from evil, and rides away alone at the end, in spite of the boy's repeated plea, "Come back, Shane." There are endless iterations in multiple genres of that loner hero, for whom community is an obstacle rather than an aid. You can generate a list without my help. I will mention one: Bruce Willis's character John McClane in *DIE HARD*, who, alone (at least physically), takes on the racial and national "others" who attack American corporate capitalism, and, in the process, he restores his independent wife, successful in her career under her maiden name, to her former domestic, submissive, primary role as his wife and mother of his children.

Our national concept of freedom, asserted in the motto *E PLURIBUS UNUM* (out of many, one) is often interpreted as privileging the one above the many. Rules and laws that protect the many by restricting the behavior of the individual are often considered un-American, even anti-American. In some ways, concepts of what it is to be an American are antithetical. Those who champion the concept of the melting pot, in which individuality is absorbed by the dominant culture, conflict with identity politics that assert the self as specific within a generic American identity, that is, identities founded, at least in part, on sex, on race, on class, on sexuality, on heritage (an identity that may require a hyphen alongside the label, American).

Antithetical to any ideological privileging of the individual, Christ's life models an emptying of self, a privileging of the other above the self. We might tend to think of such emptying as a loss of self, an erasure of our individuality. But does being selfless rather than selfish mean having no self? Philippians exhorts us to eschew "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." Yes, Christ was both divine and human, and he was able to set aside one part of his selfhood in service to others. But we are not Christ. How can we do that? He not only emptied himself; he also became a servant, humbled himself, was obedient unto death. Are we as Christians commanded to disappear as ourselves, to abandon all self-interest? Remember that Paul is talking to the church at Philippi about their obligations to their community as a church, and to the world to whom that church must represent Christ. He tells them that, as a community, they must be in unity, and that Christ's example of humility is the path to

harmonious communal life. But does he expect us as individuals and as a church to manage this on our own? No.

I remember the popular catchphrase, what would Jesus do? That question seems linked in a way to lists of rules and regulations. Perhaps a better question in light of today's epistle is what would Jesus think, what would be in his mind, what would his attitude be. That is an expansion beyond mere actions. Jesus expanded the law, the commandments, to encompass our thoughts as well as our actions. He included lust, desire, in his definition of adultery, something inward that might not ever be acted upon. Our actions and words can be hypocritical, a pose, a performance. But what you think, what is in your mind, IS the self, IS your identity, who you are, what you are. And how are we to change our minds from our innate selfishness to Christlike selflessness? Not alone.

At first, the command in verse 12 to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,” is rather overwhelming. It sounds as if our salvation is up to us, which makes no sense, since we know our salvation is dependent on Christ's death on the cross in our stead, his taking our sins upon himself and paying the price we owe, redeeming our guilt through his innocence. Belief in that central tenet of our faith, our repentance and acceptance of his grace, that is our salvation. How, then, do we work out our own salvation? We live a life that exemplifies our salvation, and we do not, we cannot do that on our own. If we were on our own, we would indeed be filled with fear and trembling, but the passage ends with this reassurance: “for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” We are not dependent upon our own strength. God works within us as his own. He gives us the desire, the will, the energy, the power for the work we have to do. He enables us by his motivating presence within us. We are humbled by that presence, not degraded by it, and we obey, not because he dominates us into submission, but because Christ has gone before us, has modeled the mind, the attitude we are to emulate.

Our humility, if it is like his, is manifest in our being a servant to others. As Christ did, we are to privilege others above ourselves, to show concern and care for others, to dismantle the self/other binary that keeps us separate. Perhaps the language of romance is worth noting, marriage ceremonies in which the two become one (I must admit some of the symbols of that union in contemporary weddings are a bit much, to me: the bride and groom use their two candles to light one candle and then extinguish their own, as if their individuality is extinguished in their union; one I have not yet witnessed is the blending of sand, and I leave that without comment). The language of romance occurs in Biblical descriptions of Christ's relationship to the church as his Bride. And we as his church are, as Paul encourages, to live in unity and love and selflessness with one another. As the Trinity is one and yet three, a great mystery, we as the church are to be individuals and yet one, diverse members of the same body.

One of the primary signs of our singular identity as individuals is our name. I teach a couple of stories in which the wife is, at least in the text, nameless. The husband always addresses her with diminutive “endearments,” and I argue that lacking a name signifies lacking subjectivity, identity, individual will and freedom, that the erasure of one's name is the erasure of one's self. Notice that in today's epistle, after Christ empties

himself, humbles himself, and becomes obedient unto death FOR US, for OUR redemption, God “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.” His divinity is made manifest through his NAME, his identity, his selfhood. A name that evokes in those who hear it both obeisance and proclamation.

Let that same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus.

And may we, as his servants, and as servants to one another, will and work for his good pleasure.

AMEN