

The First Presbyterian Church of Redlands
Rev. Cheryl Raine
January 5, 2020 Second Sunday of Christmas

First Reading is Romans 12:1-3

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. ³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”

The Second Reading is Philippians 2:5-8

⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.”

The Sermon is entitled *Mind of Christ*

Last year the leadership of this church, the session and the deacons, crafted a statement of who we are as church. Would you please turn to the cover of your bulletin, as you will find the statement right below the name of our church? Let’s say it together: *Living the heart and mind of Christ at the heart of the city*. These first two Sundays of this New Year, I am going to explore what it might mean for us to live more fully the heart of Christ and the mind of Christ, starting with the mind of Christ today.

On this day before Epiphany, the Magi ready to give their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the Christ Child. Yet, do we have a clear understanding of God’s vision for this Christ Child? What informs our understanding of Emmanuel? Do the prophetic words of Isaiah, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light,” give us a clue? Or what about these words of Isaiah, “the Lord... has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners, to comfort all who mourn?” What exactly was the mindset of this child born of Mary and baptized by John when he walked among us? If you were asked to explain what we mean by “the mind of Christ” in our statement what would you say? And what stories from scripture would inform your thoughts?”

Let’s revisit what Apostle Paul says about Jesus’ mindset – about the distinctive vision and driving force behind his life. Listen to Eugene Peterson’s translation of these verses:

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“Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. Jesus had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he ***set aside the privileges of deity*** and took on the status of slave, became human! ***Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process.*** He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he ***lived a selfless, obedient life*** and then ***died a selfless, obedient death.***”

The more familiar translation of the Revised Standard Version puts it this way, “Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ***but emptied himself...humbled himself and became obedient.***”

What about us? What is our mindset? Is it anything like Christ’s?

If we are honest with ourselves our mindset is probably far from the mindset of Christ. Or as Maren Tirabassi’s poem reminds us we are prone to decisions that are contrary to the mind of Christ. Listen to the poem she wrote for Epiphany entitled *Two Days Out*, as she reflects on the Magi and the Christ Child:

Source of Poem: (<https://revgalblogpals.org/>)

God, we are two days out
from epiphany
and my view is backside of a camel,
the road is a blister-maker,
the night-sky is cloudy,
and I think I am
going to make a bad decision.

I know that being wise
involves avoiding the bullies,
in families, communities,
schoolyards, prison yards,
nursing homes, work places,
churches, and across the globe,

because their reasons
to make decisions
have nothing to do with
the light-years of hope in a star
or the priority that dreams have
to protect children.

We are always two days out
from epiphany,
at a fork in the road --
Jerusalem or Bethlehem?

Help us find
the place to set down
the precious burden of our gifts.
amen.

“I think I am going to make a bad decision,” confesses Maren Tirabassi. Have you made any bad decisions in the first five days of this New Year? I know I have. They weren’t big decisions, but those little ones that quickly escalate tension and emotions. I was short when it would have been best to be patient. I was quick to judge when grace would have been the better option. We know immediately when we make little bad decisions, because grace is absent and love is not cultivated. The absence of grace and love hold true for more substantial bad decisions as well.

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Of course, this sounds a bit like the state of our world, where tempers flare and chaos takes hold. Where self-interest is supreme, especially at the expense of others. Where retaliation and retribution are standard fare even when lives are at stake. The world stage is aflame with powers and principalities ready and willing to use destructive force against each other, even though natural disasters are doing more than enough damage - a typhoon in the Philippines on Christmas Day and consuming wildfires raging across Australia.

I hear myself saying this first Sunday of the New Year, “I know that being wise” means I am to be transformed by the renewing of my mind, so that I may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. Being wise as a church means we will be transformed by listening deeply to the movement of the Spirit within us and around us as we make decisions together. But we all know that living fully into God’s vision, into the ways of God in our own lives is not easy, because ego bound we always stand at a fork in the road with one route named self-interest and the other named willingness to self-empty.

Self-interest or self-emptying? We all have a decision to make as this New Year dawns. Will we allow the coming of the Christ Child to restore us to our intended role as image bearers of the One Living God? Will we self-empty so that we can love and serve others with the same extravagant grace and extraordinary humility that Christ did among us?

“Brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering,” translates Peterson in Romans. I appreciate Peterson’s translation, “placing our lives before God,” as doing so makes possible the way of transformation. Imagine if we awoke every morning and recommitted to placing our lives before God praying something like this,

Good morning God. Thank you for the gift of this day. I have a full schedule ahead of me and I know I am prone to bad decisions. So, will you please accompany me this day.

Break into my consciousness when I forget that you are with me. Guide my ways every waking moment helping me to act with extravagant grace and extraordinary humility.

Give me the courage to self-empty, to focus beyond my self-interest to the interests of others, even as I recognize that all that I have and all that I am able to do is sheer gift.

Thank you for lovingly transforming my mind to be more like Christ this day. Amen.

Of course, we probably need to pray something like this morning, noon and night and maybe even more often, because self-interest is so ingrained in us and in our culture.

Humility, self-emptying, and obedience, which reflects the mind of Christ, are not cultural norms. Yet, by the grace of God, these traits at work within us have extraordinary transformational power. Just ask reporter Tom Junod who called Fred Rogers’ the nicest man in the world. On New Year’s Day I went to see *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, which was inspired by Tom Junod’s article that was written in 1998. If you haven’t seen the movie, I suggest it would be a good one to see, as it may help us all live more faithfully our new vision of living the heart and mind of Christ at the heart of the city.

In December, as the movie was making its way to the box office, Tom Junod wrote an article in the Atlantic Journal, saying: “*A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, seems like a culmination of the gifts that Fred Rogers gave me and all of us, gifts that fit the definition of

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grace because they feel, at least in my case, undeserved.” Rogers exemplified God’s extravagant grace and extraordinary humility, focusing not on himself, but on others.

Junod continues writing, “Although [Rogers] made his living speaking to children, his message and example endure because he found a way to speak to all of us... He wanted to talk to us so that we could remember what it was like to be child. And he could talk to anyone, believing that if you remembered what it was like to be a child, you would remember that you were a child of God.” Rogers also reminded Junod of this transformational truth regularly, saying, “You are loved with a greater love than anyone could ever imagine, Tom. I trust that you’ll never ever forget that.”

Rogers exemplifies for me what it means to live the mind of Christ. We first have to remember whose we are. We have to remember that we are a child of God. We also have to remember that we are loved with a greater love than we can imagine or as God said through the prophet Isaiah, “[Remember], you are precious and honored, and I love you.” When we remember whose we are, we are given a new perspective, which allows us to remember that every other human being on this planet is a child of God, too.

On October 25, 1998, Junod received an email from Rogers as an answer to one of his many questions. Rogers wrote, “Yet at the heart of the original creation is that Word (call it Love, call it Grace, call it Peace ...) that essence which is lodged somewhere within each of us that longs for ultimate expression.” If we choose to allow it to grow we’ll be given help. If we choose otherwise we won’t be forced. If there is such a thing as a “dark corner” of God’s nature then I think it is God’s refusal to go back on the promise of “the creation’s freedom to love or not.”

“We are always two days out from epiphany, at a fork in the road,” for all of creation, including you and me, have the freedom to love or not. We have the freedom to choose self-interest or self-emptying. We have the freedom to choose obedience to the ways of God or not. We have the freedom to exploit privilege or humbly empower others. We have the freedom to choose which folk of the road we will travel.

Will we choose to be image bearers of the One Living God, whom we know most fully through Christ Jesus? Will we live ever more fully the mind of Christ – the way of self-emptying, humility and obedience, so that we may discern the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect? We stand at a fork in the road. Amen.