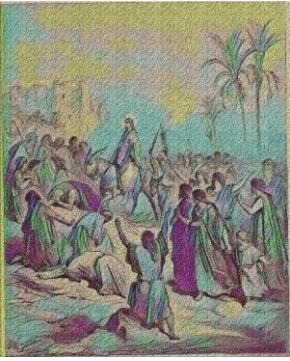


Having the Mind of Christ
Sermon for Palm Sunday
Sermon Text: Philippians 2:5-11



Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

What would your reaction be if you heard on the news today that the sales tax was going to be increased to 40 percent? What would you do if someone insulted you horribly and for no reason? And how would you react if you were suddenly struck down by a serious illness or learned of the death of a loved one? With all these questions, your reaction would be shaped by different circumstances. Your reaction is embedded in your identity, which in turn is strongly influenced by your history, upbringing, age, and even your physical condition. A multitude of influences define and shape us as humans and determine how we live in this world and interact with others. You could say that we humans are like computers that are programmed in a certain way and act accordingly. And this is where this Sunday's sermon text proposes a complete "reset." We are to allow ourselves to be reprogrammed. We are to adopt the mindset of Christ. Jesus Christ should determine our whole life. We are to be mindful in a way that corresponds to life in Jesus Christ. Strangely enough, the original language of the text lacks a verb in the second part, it says: "have this mind... in Christ." It doesn't mean "you should imitate Jesus Christ." What is meant by this? This question is particularly important because these two words, "in Christ," explain a large part of the apostle Paul's letters. Here, the apostle Paul is saying that our mindset, in other words our identity, is "in Christ." What this means is made clear by the description that follows. It isn't actually a description, but a song that was popularly sung in early Christianity and depicts the life of Jesus Christ in simple terms. This path of Jesus is explained in a worshipful way similar to the Apostles' Creed. This life begins with God and leads all the way down to "obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" and then Jesus' path leads back to the right hand of God, where the whole world will worship Him. In fact, this path of Jesus is the opposite of the normal human mindset. Most people strive to make their lives better, not worse. You could almost say that it's part of our identity to strive for higher things, not lower things.

This aspiration began with Adam and Eve. They didn't just want to be in paradise, they wanted to be like God. Power, success, wealth, and beauty are the things all people strive for. This striving for higher and better is deeply rooted in all of us and determines how we treat other people. Isn't that basically what our whole identity is about? Our ultimate goal is to be better off than we are now. This is how we are conditioned from the first years of our lives. We are shown role models of how we can and should become richer, smarter, and more athletic. It's also not wrong that we want a better life for ourselves and for our children, that we strive for good grades at school or want to earn a better salary. But sooner or later, we realize that all our striving is not without cost. Like Adam and Eve, we have to earn the things we achieve by the sweat of our brow, so to speak. Our path to the top is therefore fraught with all the disadvantages that are part of the curse of man who is trapped in sin. The process of earning, striving, and working is part of life, but it all comes at a price. Sooner or later, we realize that money, fame, glory, or whatever we have gained is not everything. Doubts arise. Was it all worth it? Wasn't the price I had to pay for my job too high for my health? And what if I pursued a goal that turned out to be a dead end? What if the love that looked so beautiful in the picture book turned into hell? What if I fail? For most people, fear sets in at this point. They are afraid of losing something or not reaching their goal. A life driven by fear makes us stingy. We begrudge others nothing and always suspect that they are trying to cheat us. This fear-driven life walks all

over others' dead bodies. We walk over dead bodies to defend our own self or to be better than others. And if we feel disadvantaged, we very quickly end up with a Cain and Abel situation, where one brother stabs the other in the back. Our identity in this world is driven by fear. We are afraid of losing our prosperity or our good reputation. And that's why we cling desperately to everything that is part of our lives.

The letter to the Philippians doesn't suggest that we escape these influences of our world. It doesn't prevent us from getting an education or looking for a good job, nor from getting good grades at school. Nor does it discourage us from taking care of our possessions. But it puts "in Christ" in front of all this striving. "In Christ" is now what completely defines us and our lives. This doesn't mean that we have to do everything that Jesus did. No, it means that we put on Jesus and everything He has done for us like a garment. It means that Christ and His identity envelop and protect our whole person. In baptism, we have done just that. We are baptized into Christ and resurrected with Him, so that we are now marked by His identity. Again and again, we can take refuge in this garment that is Christ.

What Jesus does, however, is exactly the opposite of what people want. Instead of striving for power and honor, Jesus goes in the opposite direction. What no human being wants, namely, to lower ourselves, is what this Jesus wants. Instead of keeping divinity for Himself, Jesus gives it all up. Jesus' goal was not to be the most famous and the greatest. He already was that. He occupied the highest position in the universe. His nature is God. There is absolutely nothing to add or correct. And this Jesus, who had everything that could be had, neither looks up to see what else He could get ahold of, nor does He cling to everything to prevent anyone from taking anything away from Him. No, He proves to be sublime precisely because He seeks the path to lowliness. This can be seen both in His return to Jerusalem on a donkey and in His journey from His heavenly existence to us here on earth. His focus always remains on what is beneath Him. He is prepared to give up everything! But why is He doing this? Why this change from the very top to the very bottom? Why does Jesus, against all human nature, want things to be worse for Him instead of better? There is no other reason than that Jesus has us in mind. Jesus sees our abandonment by God. He sees our loneliness. He sees our hatred and He sees all the senseless murder and manslaughter. He wants us to be better and therefore He wants us to be worse. That's why Jesus Christ gives up His divinity. That's why God becomes man, because He no longer wants to leave us to our own devices. The only thing that drove Jesus was our situation. Our suffering was what motivated Him. Therefore, when Paul writes: "Have this mind 'in Christ Jesus'", he doesn't mean that we have to give up divine riches just like Jesus. No, he simply means that the new identity in Christ defines us from now on. After we have become one with Jesus, we have a new identity that is based solely on the deeds of this Jesus Himself. Be oriented in a way that corresponds to salvation in Jesus Christ. We are to work, rest, strive, and do everything else that other people do. All these things do not define us, except for the great call of our Lord: "It is finished!" Certainly, something changes in our mindset when we are in this Jesus. It may mean that we are still able and willing to do good or even special things. But not at any price. Nor do we want to keep what we have achieved at all costs and cling to it. No, being connected to Jesus means having a different goal. We live from the fact that our Lord Jesus hasn't remained in heaven but has become a part of us. This is not a moral appeal to finally become better people, but a completely natural consequence of our real and physical connection with Christ.

At the beginning, I said that our nature is shaped by many things. Paul presents us with a different nature and a different identity. He doesn't give us moral prescriptions or magic formulas on how we can better deal with problems. Instead, he introduces us to Christ in song and worship. The song begins in heaven, where Jesus gives up the divine for us and then makes His way to us and our situation. The song ends in heaven again. There, we see the living and risen Lord sitting at the right hand of God. Our goal is Jesus. We may live in and with Him today. We are connected to Him when our lives lead us into the depths of despair, guilt, illness, and death. And when all these things burden and weigh us down, we know that they don't have the last word. The last word belongs to the One who sits at the right hand of God. In this Jesus, who humbled Himself for us and who is exalted for us, lies the secret of our new nature. Amen.