

“A WHOLE ‘NOTHER MINDSET”

A Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 3, 2017

Text: Matthew 16:21-28

What does it mean to set our mind on divine things?

It means this: To have our fundamental mindset shaped according to the model provided for us by Jesus, so that all our relations with others are determined by willingness to serve one another.

This is the Christian formulation of what it means to fulfill the two great commandments: to love God with all we are, and to love one another as ourselves.

In every relation with other people, you and I are called by God to be servants of them. Not slaves, as though our own wishes were to be extinguished by the needs of others. Not lords, as though the wishes of others were to be extinguished by our power. But free and willing servants of our neighbors—anyone who gets close.

That is what it means to be transformed by the renewal of our minds, to use Paul’s language.

If we don’t want to be a skandalon or stumbling block to Jesus, we should allow our minds to be transformed by his Spirit so that life, for us, is free and mutual service.

Our good friend Peter, who only one week ago was the rock on whom the church would be founded, this Sunday is advising Jesus to go north, not south; and receives a terrible rebuke: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block [skandalon] to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

From church foundation to stumbling block in the blink of an eye.

What caused Jesus to be displeased? What did he mean, saying Peter was “setting his mind” not on “divine things” but on “human things”?

What does it mean for us to set our minds on divine things?

I’ll tell you right off one thing it does not mean. This past week I spent many hours studying the Bible—this passage in particular, but also other related passages. I looked at the Greek, consulted reference works, and reflected first on this whole passage and then on this little bit of it.

“Studying the Bible” is not the same as “setting your mind on divine things.” Jesus does not mean that we need to spend our time on religious instead of secular topics. That is not the distinction he means. I have known lots of people in my field. There are as many selfish, unkind, impatient, unbelieving people in my area as in any other. I doubt Jesus would offer our group as examples of what it means to set your mind on divine things, just because we think all the time about religion or church or the Bible.

So, what does it mean?

In order to answer this, we need to look at what it means to “set your mind” on something. The Greek word in verse is the verb form of the noun φρόνησις. Phronesis refers to “a type of wisdom or intelligence . . . more specifically a type of wisdom relevant to practical things, requiring an ability to discern how or why to act virtuously and encourage practical virtue.” “It is distinguished from other words for wisdom or intellect. Because of its practical character, it is often translated as “practical wisdom,” and sometimes as “prudence.” Someone has proposed “mindfulness.”

But Jesus uses the active transitive verb. Not a concept or virtue, but the action: “to think” (in this special sense). Translators have always struggled with how to convert that into English. Here are a few examples of Matthew 16:23 in translation:

- “You aren’t thinking the way God thinks but the way humans think.”
- “You are not on the side of God, but of men.” (not much of a verb!)
- “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”
- “You are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but on man’s.”
- “Thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.”

Those are all poor translations. None of them captures the fact that Jesus is accusing Peter of employing a faulty practical way of thinking. Peter is wrong for “attempting to act virtuously,” but on a faulty basis, because he is still thinking only of what is best for Jesus and him.

I can’t translate it better, but I want to do the next best thing. I want to fill up the meaning you have in mind when you hear or use the phrase.

Let’s start by changing from “set your mind,” which has its own connotations, to “think.” Then let me tell you what kind of thinking it is, to “think” the things of God. I want to load the word with connotations and associations, so you can think the way Jesus wants you to think.

I will find the connotations of the word by finding other locations in the New Testament where that word is found. Nowhere else in the gospels, for starters. But many times in the letters of Paul! In some key passages, where we discover that Paul knew what Jesus was after.

So, how does Paul make use of this special word for “think”?

In Philippians 2:5 Paul says, “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. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name.”

It is almost as though Paul is writing a commentary on our gospel for today. He says that we should “set our minds” the way Jesus “set his mind.” And how did Jesus set his mind? To go to Jerusalem for our sakes, even though it was not in his best interest, because “the son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Paul is telling us is telling us to employ the sort of thinking that characterized Jesus’ entire existence. From the beginning, when Jesus was “thinking the things of God,” or “trying to act virtuously,” he did what this passage says: he did not seek to be successful in human terms (that’s human phronesis), but instead relinquished his divinity and became a human person, and among people he did not try to be a king or lord but instead became a slave, and even as a slave he humbled himself to the very point of suffering himself to be killed by people who hated him, in order to serve them!

Jesus was not being smart or wise in human terms. He was using a godly or divine phronesis, whereby it is more blessed to give than to receive, the one who would be first of all must be last of all and servant of all, etc., etc., and here I could bring in practically every story or saying of Jesus and show you their congruence with this singular frame of mind.

Jesus set his mind not on being all he could be, but on the well-being or blessedness of others. That is to say, Jesus was love. “The son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

In consequence of which, according to Philippians, because Jesus had this mind in him which Paul wants us to have in ourselves, God raised him up and gave him the name that is above all other names. He was tops. Which is, by the way, exactly what Jesus was forecasting when he told his disciples he was headed for Jerusalem first to be a victim, but ultimately to be raised by God.

How do I know Paul understood Jesus' meaning? Because after Jesus rebuked Peter he said "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?" And remember, this whole conversation took place because Jesus had just announced his intention of going to Jerusalem to be killed by the elders and the chief priests and scribes, and on the third day raised.

In that context, Jesus said we should—like him—think the things of God, not the human things.

When Jesus commended to us the way of thinking which is "setting our mind on the things of God," he was not telling us to act religious or keep ourselves pure. He was commending to us quite the opposite. He wanted us to look at him and see the mind operating in him. Then he wanted us to have our minds transformed (Romans 12, what we read last week) so that we, like he, would seek to live our lives loving others according to their need; not fearing that to do so would mean failure, but confident—because of his promise—that he would be with us and in the end we will be treated as God treated him.

Amen.

