

19th Sunday after Pentecost

“Whatever”

“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”

Whatever, Uncle Scott! Our niece, Madeleine, used to say that to me when I would tell a “Dad” joke or tease her at times.

Using three fingers to represent a “W” and an “E”, she would just look at me and with her sign language say: “Whatever.”

The word “Whatever” can be used, as Madeline would use it was a response of indifference to what I thought were very witty jokes. (Yeah, well, whatever Uncle Scott).

Using the word “Whatever” we say things like “Do or say whatever you like” indicating there are no restrictions or consequences for your actions or words.”

Others will use it in a questioning way, “Whatever is the matter with you?” Or in a grace-filled, forgiving, reconciling way, “We will love you whatever happens in your life.”

Indifferent to or exasperated by me, she would say and others would jokingly join in, “Whatever, Uncle Scott,” and then everyone would move on in conversation.

While the word “Whatever” can be a dismissive word, it can also be used in a positive way, inviting us to consider another perspective, another way of seeing and understanding people and one’s relationship to them.

This is how the Apostle Paul is using the word “Whatever” as he concludes his letter to the early community of followers of Jesus who gathered together in Philippi.

Paul is aware of some struggles and conflicts they had been having among themselves and with their leadership. It was creating division in their community over how they should interact among themselves, but also with the reality of their world which was ruled by the Roman Empire. The way the Roman Empire expected its citizens to obey and act was counter to the way Christ had called them as followers to act.

Through his letter to the Philippians, Paul was addressing this challenging dichotomy of loyalties, one demanded by the Roman government, and the

other as followers of Christ. The Roman government promised "Pax Romana" but only by a powerful, and if necessary, forceful obedience to their laws.

Paul, on the other hand, was reminding this small community of believers, that Christ promised a different kind of peace, a Shalom, of God's love which offered equity, compassion, caring, empathy, kindness and concern for others, through the sharing of resources. Where the Romans flexed their military might, lording their control over people, Paul reminds his readers in Chapter 2, that Jesus, though the Son of God, did not cling to that power, but gave it up, becoming fully human, even to the point of suffering death just as all humans, no matter how powerful and wealthy they are will do.

In chapter 2, verse 5, Paul then says: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

"Let the same mind be in you, in us, that was in Christ Jesus."

Paul comes back to this as he concludes his letter, addressing their own divisions and struggles with leadership, urging the leadership to "be of the same mind as Christ."

Being of the "same mind" as Christ, does challenged us as followers of Jesus to think, reflect, and prayerfully ask ourselves what does this mean for us, who like the Philippians, live as citizens of an Empire, America, but at the same time, profess our loyalty to Christ as Lord and Savior?

And what do we do when our calling as followers of Christ takes us in a radically different way of living and relating to the world, then the powers that be in our elected officials and government demand of us as citizens?

Paul understood this dichotomy facing the Philippians, and in that way us today. Yes, we are citizens of American, but more so and above all other loyalties, we are first and foremost, citizens of the Kingdom of God within us, around us, on earth now and forever. This is the mindset Jesus had and Paul reminds us, as followers of Jesus that we are too also have.

I know, it makes you think, right? It is challenging for us, because some have tried to Americanize Christianity as a "national religion" making the two into one mind. And they are not, and never have been.

The mind of Christ is not limited to one nation, or any nation. The mind of Christ knows no borders, and is not defined by any Empirical way of thinking or laws, save for the law of God's Love. And as we know, those who love abide in God and God abides in them.

Paul knows this mindset is a whole new way of thinking for the followers of Jesus. This is in part why he writes these very famous words which are often quoted: "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is loving, whatever is pure, whatever is

commendable, whatever is of excellence, whatever is worthy, whatever is compassionate, whatever is merciful, and whatever is noble, think about these things.”

We are to think about these things, not just once in a while or only on Sunday mornings, but daily, and how they impact our mindset in all we say and do - at church, in engaging in civic responsibilities, like voting, at school or work or in the words we speak or how we treat others, including those who are different than us and the most vulnerable among us.

In her commentary on Philippians 4, Dr. Susan Eastman, Assistant Professor of Biblical Practice and Formation at the Duke University Divinity School writes: **“These are things that please God, and reflect the presence of the sacred in our lives to others. Permeates our mindset, our way of thinking, our way of viewing the world, and our relationships with friends, neighbors, strangers locally and globally. There is no separation of our faith from any thing we do formally or informally. Paul is not saying that this is simply for this group or that group. Paul knows the divisions exist among his audience, that there are conflicts over leadership, struggles to stay focused on their calling as followers of Christ. He expects this from the gathered community, and from those who are the leaders’ in church and community.”**

The Apostle Paul knows it is easier to just say “yeah, whatever” and brush off the challenging ways of Christ’s mindset, so we can go along with the thinking of others who would take us further from God’s love.

That is why Dr. Eastman adds: **“Yes, there is the immediate reality of a world in which human beings are constantly at war somewhere, betraying one another, brutally suppressing each other in order to get ahead, and so forth. This was true of the Roman Empire, and it is true today. Every day we hear and see a culture that focuses on what is false, dishonorable, unjust, impure, and shameful. We begin to think that to act hopefully in such a world is unrealistic. But Paul also sees another reality, and it is the reality that holds the future. That is the reality of God's redemption, already here and still drawing near. Training our minds to think of this reality, and thereby to act with hope, is a daily mental discipline. For such a discipline, we need to experience the counter reality of God's rule in the midst of tangible human relationships. Paul offers his own relationship with the Philippians as just such a tangible counterweight to the temptation of despair and futile thinking.”**

Which is why Paul adds at the end: **“Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me,” and then adding the reassurance, that if they continue to think, reflect, and do these things, “the God of peace will be with you.”**

While is challenging for us to think in Christ's way, it really isn't brain surgery. It is just simply replacing our old mindset with Christ's mind-fullness of the sacred presence within us and in all other human beings, and how that new way of thinking brings peace and healing to God's world.

Amen.