

Each year, as the long post-Pentecost “green season” unfolds, we read our way through some New Testament books of the Bible in order. This summer, we spent much of our time reading Paul’s Letter to the Romans. Last weekend, we began reading our way through his Letter to the Philippians.

Paul’s Letter to the Philippians is different in character from many of his letters, as Paul is not angry with the Philippians. He is not writing to correct some grievous wrong in a church he started. If you want a contrast, read his letter to the Galatians, where Paul writes in part, “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” (*Gal. 3:1*)

You will not find that tone in this loving letter. Paul began in last week’s reading saying that he thanks God every time he thinks of the Christians in Philippi. Paul is in prison. We cannot be sure where, though Ephesus is likely. It is now the late 50s or early 60s, or about 25 to 30 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. These are all guesses, as Paul mentions neither the time nor place of the writing, though he gives enough clues for an educated guess.

We know from the letter that the church in Philippi learned of Paul’s imprisonment and began praying for his release. Then they sent one of their congregation, Epaphroditus, to take gifts from the church to Paul. We do not know exactly what they sent to Paul, but Paul writes back to say they have more than taken care of his needs. He also uses the letter as an occasion to encourage the faithful church to press on further on their spiritual journeys.

Paul tells the Philippians they should strive to be of the same mind as Christ. They are to think like Christ thinks. We’ve all heard the acronym, WWJD. This is a twist on WWJD, *What Would Jesus Do*. Paul says TLJT, *Think Like Jesus Thinks*.

Then, to give an example of what it means to think like Jesus, Paul quotes what is widely believed to be a hymn already known to the Philippians:

*“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.”*

That last line, “even death on a cross” may be an addition by Paul for emphasis as he is writing his letter. The hymn continues,

*“Therefore, God also highly exalted him and 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, to the glory of God the Father.”*

The hymn shows us how the church in its earliest days thought of Jesus. Christians taught that Jesus was equal with God, but emptied himself to be born in human form — and as the “God/Man” he was obedient even to the point of death on the cross. Paul then uses the hymn to push his own message home to the Christians in Philippi, calling them to greater obedience to God — obedience like that of Jesus himself.

For Paul, to know God is to know how God has acted in history. And that history is not that far back in the rear-view mirror for the folks to whom Paul speaks here. They knew well that God had taken the form of a servant when he was born in human likeness. They knew well that God humbled himself in the person of Jesus. It was through that humble obedience that Jesus came to be exalted. *We* know God through God’s actions — and God, despite all reason, was humble. How much more then should we work to be humbly obedient. Jesus became the servant of all. How can we then not put ourselves at the service of others?

If you want to think like Jesus thinks, think of how you can be of service to others. How can you reach out to show God’s love for those around you?

Paul tells us today in no uncertain terms that we are to strive to have the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus. *We* are to *Think Like Jesus Thinks* in order to do what Jesus did. Paul gets right to the point writing, “Look not to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

We’ve all been spending a lot of time and energy these past six months learning how to be the Church in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. But some years ago, you will recall, there was another pandemic — one that literally killed every single person who caught the disease. That pandemic, of course, was the AIDS pandemic. Some years ago, the Archbishop of Canterbury gave a sermon in which he talked about that pandemic. And in it, he mentioned the ministry of Ted Karpf, an assistant to the Archbishop of Capetown, South Africa. Karpf was helping the Anglican Church in South

Africa combat the AIDS pandemic, which ominously threatened life in Africa in a way difficult to grasp now that treatments have been found to keep the HIV virus at bay.

I was amazed, as I read it this week, what parallels there were in that sermon with the situation we face today. Karpf, “flying by the seat of his pants” much the way we are now with the COVID-19 pandemic, found himself fighting a battle almost as tough as the virus itself: the way people, well-meaning or not, spread fear and half-truths. It was in 1983, while Karpf was working as a priest in the diocese of Dallas in Texas, that the problem of AIDS landed on his doorstep quite literally. Karpf answered his door one night to find standing there a man with his face disfigured by the cancerous sores associated with advanced stages of the HIV/AIDS virus. The man said simply: “Will you allow me to come to your church and die here?” He went on to explain that six other churches had already turned him away.

The first thing Karpf thought was how uncertain and ill at ease he felt about honoring the man’s request. So much was being said about how AIDS spread and how dangerous AIDS could be. What would it mean for this man to share in the worship at his church? He thought of all the folks who feared drinking from a communion cup with someone that had this disease. Would they too contract the virus? But Karpf stopped long enough to *Think Like Jesus Thinks*. He thought of how Jesus welcomed the outcasts in his own society, especially the lepers who others avoided out of fear of the disease. After an initial pause, Karpf said, “My church is open to you. I will stand by you.”

The only problem was that Ted’s *church*, his parishioners, could not see it the same way. The issue was not inclusion or exclusion, but *fear*. Fear of AIDS and what it could do to a person. Karpf reached out in love to a dying man and the people of his congregation abandoned their church *and* that dying man. A few months later, there were only 21 people remaining in Karpf’s church. At one main Sunday service, only three people attended. Karpf saw no choice but to stand by the dying man offering him the love of God. There was no small cost to *Thinking Like Jesus Thinks*, but Ted Karpf felt he had no other choice. How could he not humble himself to be of service to someone in need?

I do not know where *Thinking Like Jesus Thinks* might lead us as the current health crisis facing our nation and world continues to unfold. I imagine we will be led to some uncomfortable circumstances. But if you want to take your Christian faith seriously, you will have to strive to have the same mind in you that is in Christ Jesus. You must

endeavor to *Think Like Jesus Thinks*. We need to be humble enough to realize we are capable of being misinformed and of being paralyzed by fear. We need to be welcoming enough to realize we cannot safeguard against every possible risk at the cost of compromising our service to the people God places on our doorstep. Unconditional love might call upon us not to be quite as cautious and unyielding as that church in Dallas all those years ago. Prudence and sticking our necks out for the Gospel may, in this case, lead us to opposite conclusions as to what God is calling us to do.

All I know is this: Humility and unconditional love are the thoughts of God. Think not of your own interest, but also to the interests of others. *Think Like Jesus Thinks*.