

Second Sunday in Lent  
March 17, 2019  
Philippians 3:17-4:1  
“The Mindset of Lent”

Many religious experts, popular psychologists, motivational speakers, and other leadership specialists will tell you about the importance of having a proper mindset for success. They will assure you that your way of thinking, your set of assumptions, how you make your decisions is everything. And actually there is a lot of truth there. Having the wrong mindset, such as holding on to your former failures or pain from the past, can really hinder you from trying something new and perhaps finding great success. We all know this is true from our own life experience. But simply thinking positively and trying new things is not what Paul offers in today’s Epistle.

What Paul is offering us as continue along our Lenten journey to the cross is what we might call the Mindset of Lent which has been given to us in our Baptism and will be completely brought to fullness at our resurrection.

As he nears the conclusion of his letter to the Christians in Philippi, people with whom Paul had a special closeness, he invites them to imitate him: “Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes in those who walk according to the example you have in us” (Philippians 3:17). Often when today’s prominent leaders give their sermons or pep talks, they come off as being incredibly arrogant as they hold themselves up as examples that they want you to imitate on your road to success. Now certainly we would all agree that Paul is more than some populist preacher. Paul is no arrogant archetype. Paul is an apostle, a servant, taught by none other than Jesus Christ Himself. And what he has to share with the Christians in Philippi and the Christians here is so much more than seven steps to transforming your mindset so that you may be successful. To imitate Paul really has little to do with him and everything to do with Jesus.

While the successful leaders and preachers of our day may tout their own accomplishments, Paul counts all of his as loss, as dung. He indicates such in the verses that precede our reading today. He even declares that anything that could give him confidence in the flesh he hastily sets aside, clinging only to the righteousness of Jesus. The Lenten mindset imitates Paul in this: clinging solely to the righteousness of Jesus Christ, which is ours through faith.

Moreover the Lenten mindset also laments the rejection of the cross of Christ by so many. Paul is presenting a contrast for his hearers here in chapter three. While he himself has set aside all those things that might provide him confidence in the flesh, there were many others who were not willing to set such things aside. This was not the first time that Paul had written about such enemies of the cross of Christ. Here he issues another warning about them, but this time he does so with tears. He laments their ambitions toward self-glorification and their rejection of Christ by so doing. “For many of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things” (Philippians 3:18-19).

Now the epistle to the Philippians is often called the “Epistle of Joy” because, for the most part, it is upbeat and encouraging, even though its author is in chains in Rome awaiting trial. But Paul reveals that there is a threat even more dangerous than imprisonment or even death. It’s a rejection of Jesus and His righteousness that has been won on the cross for every man, woman and child. Why would anyone reject that gracious gift? Because they believe that they can earn their own righteousness by keeping the Law. But Paul reveals that that path ends only in destruction. And so he weeps in mourning over all those he sees on the path to death. The issue is a confidence in one’s own flesh, one’s own ability to live righteously.

And it is so easy to slip into this mindset! It is so tempting to place our confidence, our trust, in our deeds and accomplishments. Even in Lent it is a great temptation for us. So what *did* you give up for Lent? Chocolate? Pop? Social Media? It’s a good thing to practice self-discipline, but it can go too far. For instance, when your self-discipline becomes something you use to feel superior to your neighbor or something you think gives you some standing before God. The pride of your old Adam always wants credit for what you do. You want God to be impressed and you want your neighbors to give you an attaboy for your effort. It seems harmless on the surface but at its heart lies a rejection of the cross of Christ and the righteousness which Jesus secured for you in His suffering and death.

It’s not just in Lent that we have this problem either. It crops up all the time. “Oh, I read a chapter in my Bible today, surely God is happy with me and I will have a good day.” “I have been really faithful attending services lately, surely God will answer this prayer because I have shown Him such devotion.” “I was so generous with that homeless fella the other day, I just know I have a good thing coming my way.” This is the mindset of the old Adam, a mindset driven by the old sinful nature that expects a reward for doing just what we are commanded to do. The mindset that Paul calls us to nurture and adopt however recognizes this as what it really is...a rejection of the cross of Christ in favor of self-glorification. And Paul calls us to lament over it.

That was our Lord’s own lament over Jerusalem too. Jesus laments that His people had a self-glorifying mindset. They had rejected each of the prophets, stoned and killed them. One such example is Jeremiah in our Old Testament lesson for today. When Jeremiah had finished proclaimed the word of Yahweh they grabbed him screaming “You shall die” and put him on trial. They likewise rejected God’s own Son as well because He proclaimed a Word that did not glorify them. The voice of the prophets was ignored. They called people to repentance but the call went unheeded. Just before Jesus wept over Jerusalem, He talked to His disciples about the narrow door. Why will many people who seek to enter find that they are unable? Because of their confidence in their own works, their confidence in the flesh, clinging to a righteousness that they have attempted to earn by keeping the Law and thereby rejecting the righteousness of Jesus. Repent! For us too the call goes out. We need to repent! We recognize in our Lord’s lament His great sadness over human rejection of His gift of righteousness which He offers. Set aside your earthly ambitions of building your own glory and righteousness and receive what He offers, a perfect righteousness that was earned by none other than God in human flesh, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

The Lenten mindset is a gift bestowed upon you in the waters of Holy Baptism, a washing of regeneration and renewal. Receive the change of focus that the Holy Spirit is constantly at work to instill in you. Christ is the narrow door and He has given Himself to you. Jesus strove not to glorify Himself but to glorify God the Father by giving up everything for you, even His own perfectly righteous life. Paul beautifully proclaims that in the second chapter of this letter as he writes: "Have this mind among yourselves, which *is* yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:5-11). Jesus emptied Himself of all His divine glory so that He could be filled with all your sin, your flawed ambitions and your filthy attempt at self-righteousness. And now He clothes you with His own perfect righteousness.

It began right there, at the font, where not only your mind but your whole self is renewed. And now that new mindset given to you by Jesus at the font looks ahead. It looks for the return of Christ and the promised resurrection as Paul declares: "Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him to subject all things to Himself. Therefore, my brothers...stand firm...in the Lord" (Philippians 3:20-4:1). That's the goal of the Christian life, not self-glorification but the glorification of God our Father, His glory bestowed on you when His Son Jesus returns to this world. That's where the transformation that was begun in your Baptism will be made complete and your lowly body will be transformed to be like Jesus' own glorified body. And our Lord has the power to do this because He is divine. He is God with all power to do what He has promised, even to remove all your sins and to replace them with His own perfect righteousness.

So press on. You have received a new mindset that looks beyond the successes in this world to something that is greater than confidence in your own flesh and accomplishments. The Lenten mindset is really nothing other than the Christian mindset. It's much more than simple positive thinking or steps you take to better yourself. It's a way of viewing yourself and the world that glories in Christ and lives and breathes repentance and faith. That is the mind that Paul invites you to imitate, returning every day to the reality of your Baptism. This is how you can stand firm in the Lord knowing that Jesus has done everything for you and for your eternal salvation. Your citizenship *is* in heaven even now as you walk the way of the cross in this world. But you never walk alone and never walk without knowing that you are righteous in the sight of God the Father because Jesus has taken all your sins and given you all His righteousness. In other words, you know with certainty as you walk through this world that you do so as God's fully forgiven child, all your sins are removed in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.