

It's Not Brain Surgery
Philippians 2: 1-13, John 10:14-18
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
April 27, 2008
Pastor Dave Carver

In the 1987 film *Good Morning Vietnam*, General Taylor looks at the mess around him and says, "This is a tempest in a teacup, much ado about nothing, for crying out loud man, this isn't brain surgery." How often have you heard that phrase? Whenever someone is looking to downplay the significance of that which they're doing, or perhaps that which someone else is doing, they'll say, "Oh come on, it isn't brain surgery." As if somehow brain surgery is the symbol of all things difficult. What about working on the bomb squad, or steam-cleaning upholstery, or toilet-training a baby? Brain surgery is hard, and everything else is not?

This morning we're going to look at Philippians 2, and if you've already closed your bibles, I'll encourage you to open them up again because we'll be looking at a few words and phrases that you've already heard, and we'll also be looking back at chapter 1. Paul's not talking about brain surgery in chapter two, but he does invite his friends to walk a difficult path.

I want to remind you that the chapter and verse divisions in the bible are only about a thousand years old. They weren't there when the stuff was first written down. Can you imagine writing an e-mail to your friends and putting in all of these artificial divisions? I'm sure that Paul could not. At the end chapter 1 he has reminded the Philippians about the need for boldness and courage in the face of suffering and difficulty. He ends that line of thought by asking the Philippians to stick closely together and stand firm – side by side with each other.

Chapter two begins with a small, but important word. The Greek word is *ei*, and it means "if". In fact, chapter 2 verse 1 contains four *eis* – four "ifs". I realize that only one of them is translated in your pew bibles, but trust me, they are all there in the Greek manuscript: If there is any encouragement, if there is any incentive, if there is any participation, if there is any affection...

Friends, you know what happens when someone you love and respect begins a sentence with so many "ifs". That person is not really wondering IF something is true...but the time the sentence is finished, you are practically shouting, "OF COURSE THERE IS!" It's a little trick in the language, isn't it? So by the time Paul finishes bringing out four "ifs" in a row, the congregation in Philippi is saying, "yes, there are all of those things...now what?"

That's when Paul begins to get at one of the concerns that is at the heart of this letter to his favorite little church. He's concerned that there is trouble in the church. People are not getting along. Brothers and sisters in the faith are not acting like true family in the Lord.

How do I know this? Because look at what he says next: “Don’t do anything out of selfishness or because you are conceited...don’t look only to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

Do you see? Pastor Paul has sensed that the people in this congregation are not treating each other well. There is a spirit of conflict that is developing within the body of Christ. Maybe it’s gossip. Maybe it’s backbiting or complaining about each other. Maybe people are too impressed with themselves and not really interested in serving their neighbors.

Do you remember when we started reading this book, I pointed out something about the way that Paul greeted the Philippians? In chapter 1, verse 1, I said that he opened, like always, by saying that the letter was to “the saints in Christ Jesus...” No big deal there. That’s how he always opens his letters. But in Philippians, and only in Philippians, he also greets “the bishops and the deacons”. And when we noticed that a couple of weeks ago, I suggested that maybe the folks in Philippi, being a colony of Rome, might have been a little too impressed with their own titles and achievements.

I thought about that again this week when I read chapter 2 verse 3, where he calls them to be humble and to think of others as better than themselves.

And then, Paul does something here that he does nowhere else in Philippians. He tells a story about Jesus. That’s important, I think. The entire letter to the Philippians is in the Bible, I know. And it’s all important. And presumably, while Paul was living in Philippi, he taught the folks plenty about Jesus. But verses 6 – 11 are the only “Jesus story” in the entire letter.

You see, Paul senses some real danger in the church at Philippi. This church, which had begun so well, was starting to stall. The dangers that Paul points out are those of selfishness, conceitedness, and an inability to think about anyone else. And Paul invites the congregation to think about those dangers in the context of Jesus. Whereas we are tempted to be selfish, Jesus came to serve others. Whereas we are tempted to be in love with ourselves and want to be noticed by others, Jesus sought to point people to God. Whereas we are tempted to take that which is easiest or best for us, Jesus willingly died for others so that they might know God’s grace.

But Paul does more than simply remind the Philippians about the ways that Jesus was. He invites them to become like Jesus. Twice in verse 2 and then again in verse 5, Paul uses the word “mind”. Have the same mind amongst yourselves, he says. Be like-minded – not just with each other, but with Jesus.

Do you see where this is going? Paul is saying, “Look, it’s not brain surgery”. It’s not a matter of intricate skill and great concentration and incredible precision. It’s a matter of thinking like Jesus thinks. Of seeing how Jesus sees. Of hearing the way that Jesus hears.

To borrow a line from another movie (perhaps my favorite film of all time, *Cool Hand Luke*), Paul says, it's not about brain surgery – some sort of external reorganization of your life. It's about getting your mind right. If you have seen that film, you'll remember the scene where the Captain looks at Luke and says, "You run one time, you got yourself a set of chains. You run twice, you got yourself two sets. You ain't gonna need no third set 'cause you're gonna get your mind right. And I mean RIGHT"

When the Captain tells Luke that he's going to get his mind right, he means that Luke's whole way of thinking is going to change – and as it does, his actions will change, too.

Paul tells his friends in Philippi to "get their minds right" – to adopt the attitude of Jesus. In doing so, they will leave selfish ambition and conceitedness behind.

I want to mention two things about the mind of Christ as Paul describes it here in Philippians 2. First, it is a mind that results in a life that is totally for others. In verses 6 – 8, Paul talks about Jesus completely shedding his heavenly powers and privileges so that he can completely obey God the Father. It is a shedding of powers and an obedience that leads to suffering and death. When Fred Craddock writes about this passage, he points out that "the grave of Christ was a cave, not a tunnel. Christ acted in our behalf without view of gain. That is precisely what God has exalted and vindicated: self-denying service for others to the point of death with no claim of return, no eye upon a reward."¹

Why does that matter? Because if we are to put on the mind of Christ and seek to live obediently and faithfully before God, we do so because it's the right way to live, not because we think that if we tough it out now for a while, God will notice our struggles and give us a big pile of blessings later. God may. God may not. Either way, I am compelled by the example of Jesus – the *mind* of Jesus – to pour out myself for others regardless of the consequences that may come my way.

The other thing that I want to mention about this passage concerning the mind of Jesus is in verse 11, where Paul says that every tongue in heaven and on earth and under the earth will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. That is not too earth-shattering for us, because most of us have grown up hearing that Jesus is the Lord.

But let's look at the word that Paul uses there: it is the Greek word *kurios*. Originally, that word meant simply "master" or "owner", and it was a title of respect. As time passed, though, it came to apply to the various

¹ *Interpretation Commentary*, (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985 p. 42).

gods and idols in the Greek world. Zeus or Poseidon, for example, would have the word *kurios* pre-fixed to their names: *kurios Zeus* or *kurios Poseidon*. When the Roman Empire came rolling through the Greek world, that is the title that was used to refer to the Emperor himself: *kurios Caesar*. Caesar is Lord. That was essentially the pledge of allegiance to the Roman Empire – are you willing to affirm to Caesar’s lordship/ownership/mastery of your very self? And yet here Paul is saying, no, there is no *kurios Zeus* or *kurios Caesar*; there is only *kurios Jesus Christos*.

A part of adopting the mind of Jesus, at least for Paul, was a reorientation of what he had always known. There is no other power, no other master, no other owner, no other lord – and one day, Paul said, even Caesar himself will proclaim that.

After Paul tells the Philippians the story about Jesus, he closes with another imperative. He says, “Since we share this one faith, and since adopting the mind of Jesus means orienting our lives to others, and since Jesus is worthy of all of our praise, then *work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*.”

Did that catch anyone else off guard? I mean, this is the same Paul who spent quite a bit of ink in the first chapter assuring the Philippians that God is in control, and that God started the work in them and that God would finish the work in them. How is it now that they are supposed to work it out themselves?

The sense here is not that they are supposed to come up with their own means of saving themselves, or to somehow polish up the old halos enough to pass into heaven on their own.

If you remember *Cool Hand Luke*, do you remember how it is that the guards and the Captain “help” Luke to get his mind right? They engage his body. He digs. And he digs. And he digs some more. And at the end of the digging, he says, “My mind is right, boss. I got my mind right”.

When Paul says to the Philippians, and to us, to “work out our own salvation”, what he’s saying is, “see that your behavior matches your words. Act yourself into the mindset that you see in Jesus.”

Perhaps another way of thinking about this charge to “work out your own salvation” is to consider my recent foot treatment. My foot was broken. I tried to heal it on my own. I tried to ignore it. I tried to pretend it

didn't bother me. But after a few months, it was still broken, I couldn't ignore it, and it did bother me. So I went to Dr. Kasonovich, who opened me up and put in a few titanium screws and did some other monkeying around in there. He put me in a cast and sent me to bed, and then to crutches, and then to that really cool little cart. He took the crutches off, and sent me to Leslie Fisher, who now is telling me to "work out my own healing". So several times a day I sit in my home and stretch my leg, twist my foot, test my balance, and so on. Several times a week I go in and Leslie and her team watch me do that, and then tell me to do more.

I was, and am, powerless to heal the broken bones in my foot. Someone else began that work in me. But unless I continue with the sometimes painful behaviors associated with "working out" that foot, then I won't have the use of that foot that I need, and it might as well still be broken.

So there is dissension and discord in Philippi. And in Pittsburgh. There is gossip, rivalry, selfishness. It's there. What about it? That's nothing new. How are you going to deal with your brothers and sisters in the faith?

God has called you, and the Philippians. God has given you every means necessary to adopt the mindset of Jesus; God has positioned you so that you no longer need to be a slave to yourself, tormented by your own ego, and consumed with your own desires. God has done all of that before you even showed up. But the task remains for you to live into that. For you to want it. For you to practice it. You see, you walk in here and see these sisters and brothers who are irritating and frustrating and loveable and stubborn and holy and profane and unforgiving and gracious...and what are you going to do? Some might say, "well, I'll pray and ask Jesus how he would treat them." But that's not open for discussion. We already know how Jesus treated them. He loved the heck out of them. He was crazy about them. That's not the point. The point is, how will you treat them? Will you have the discipline to treat them the way that Christ himself has already treated them.

It's not brain surgery. It's getting your mind right. Every day. And I'm glad to be working on it with you. Amen.