

Alice S. Nichols

October 1, 2017

Grace Episcopal Church, Hopkinsville, KY

Pentecost 17/Proper 21/Year A/Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13;  
Matthew 21:23-32.

“Let this mind be in you”

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Breath of Life. Amen.

When I was at Christ Church in Elizabethtown, one of the unexpected joys and experiences I will always treasure was being involved in a group we called Heartland Interfaith—a group to promote dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims, initiated by one Muslim woman who began searching for churches that would be interested in learning more about Islam and that would not attempt to convert Muslims to Christianity. She quickly found the Episcopal Church and one non-denominational church. Gradually a group formed that included representation from several mainline churches—and one Jewish person, who was an especially faithful member. A group of twenty or so people gathered in a circle in the parish hall at Christ Church on numerous Monday evenings, with the agenda of understanding and appreciating our differing religions and finding common ground—ground that would allow us to recognize that we are bound together—that we are all one—rather than separated. For me, that time of recognition came when I heard, for the second or third time, a Muslim friend say, “The word ‘Islam’ itself literally means ‘submitted to God.’” The word “Islam” itself literally means “submitted to God.”

When those words grabbed my complete attention, today’s reading from the letter to the Philippians flashed into my head. What I saw clearly was the foundational sameness that Christianity and Islam share—that Christians and Muslims share. The word “Christianity” may

not literally mean “submitted to God,” but, if we understand Christianity to mean “following the path of Jesus,” that definition will soon or eventually translate into the same meaning. Jesus found his deepest identity in his “submission to God.” His submission was so complete that we understand him to be God’s own self—“God with us”—a total submission—fully human becoming fully divine—remaining both.

We think of there being a great chasm between Christians and Muslims, but there is perhaps an even greater chasm between Christians and Christians. I’m sure you know what I’m talking about, but I’ll give an example. Some who consider themselves to be Christian might say that there is one path to what we call “salvation,” a “plan of salvation” that culminates in a once-and-for-all “conversion” experience—an unforgettable moment of encounter with Jesus that alters the entire course of their lives and, of course, determines where they will “spend eternity.” At another place on the spectrum—maybe the other end—are some who consider themselves to be Christian who have never had that experience, who have maybe grown up being nurtured in Christianity, having a sense of deep connection with a loving God, and finding themselves throughout their lives on an ongoing journey of transformation in relationship with God. Those are two very different perspectives on what “salvation” means.

Even though some of Paul’s words have been used as evidence of the validity of the first understanding of salvation, today’s reading seems to me to say more about that second understanding. Paul doesn’t tell the Philippians to follow certain clear and simple steps. He says the opposite. “Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling.” He doesn’t mean that the Philippians should be shaking and quaking in their sandals because they are fearful that they haven’t “gotten it right.” He’s telling them that it is an awesome thing to enter this process—to

enter into a deep relationship with God, trusting that God is at work in us, “enabling us to will and to work for his good pleasure.” What a wonderful way of talking about salvation—that God works in us for God’s own pleasure. We become the pleasure of God! That’s an amazing and life-transforming realization. That sounds like salvation to me!

Paul challenges the Philippians to take on the mind of Jesus Christ. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” We may have heard this passage so many times that it goes in one ear and out the other. We may not think of it as a do-able thing. Surely Paul must be exaggerating. How could we possibly let the mind of Christ be our minds?

In these few verses, Paul is telling us who Jesus is—what it means to be fully human and fully divine. It’s that “emptying thing.” Jesus empties himself. Emptying is difficult to understand because most of us have had so little experience of it. We spend most of our lives filling ourselves in various ways rather than emptying—attaching rather than detaching—grabbing and holding on rather than letting go. It is hard to choose to empty ourselves—to choose the path of humility and obedience. Self-emptying goes against our instinctual drives and urges.

I went to a seminar in Louisville some time back presented by the Rev. Michael Dowd, author of [Thank God for Evolution](#). Michael and his wife, Connie Barlow, have dedicated their lives to spreading the message that science and religion are not at odds with each other—that the theory of evolution is not in conflict with Christianity—that science and religion speak the same message, using two different languages. At that time, they were traveling all over the United States in a van that had their logo painted on it in red—two Christian symbols of the fish—one with DARWIN painted inside and the other with JESUS painted inside—and the two fish were

kissing each other! Michael and Connie have spent their lives spreading this message because they believe passionately that understanding how science and religion work together opens up possibilities for saving the earth and forming healing relationships with people around the globe. They would probably say that self-emptying is only possible because of where we are at the present point in the evolutionary process of the human brain. The most recent part of the human brain to be developed is the pre-frontal cortex, which allows us to exercise judgment and enables us to rise to a higher level of consciousness and dedicate ourselves to higher purposes. At the same time, there are those other parts of the brain that pull us back from pursuing those higher purposes. And so, there is a struggle within ourselves. Will we empty or fill? Will we allow the mind of Christ to be our minds or will we live with what our lower instincts tell us to do? Our lives depend on the answer to that question.

A Benedictine sister has written a poem about this process of working out our own salvation—of self-emptying and letting the mind of Christ be in us. This is her poem:

Alone  
 All-one  
 Alone with God  
 All-one with God  
 Being alone with God  
 Being all-one with God  
 All-one  
 Alone.

It is a terrible grace.  
 An awesome gift,  
 but terrifying all the same.  
 There is no way to get there  
 except to lose yourself,  
 to lose what you know of yourself.  
 And then, the battle is over.  
 There will be nothing left but God.

Being alone, all-one, with God  
 is a terrible and beautiful grace.  
 Terrible, because  
 the only way there  
 is to lose yourself.

Beautiful, because  
 when you lose yourself  
 there is no one left but God.  
 You are all-one  
 Alone with God!

It happened to Jesus  
 It can happen to you  
 If you stay with Jesus  
 it will happen to you.

Alone  
 All-one  
 Alone with God.  
 All-one with God.

Now I understand  
 why Jesus went out  
 to the desert hills so often  
 alone . . . (Macrina Wiederkehr, A Tree Full of Angels, 95-6)

We find God's pleasure along the path of self-emptying. It is an ongoing process. We are always "being saved." We never "get it right" once and for all, at least on this side of the grave. May God grant us the desire to allow the mind of Christ to be our mind as well. May God give us the will and courage and strength to continue on the path that Jesus walked—for our own sake and for the sake of the world. Amen.

