

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

**MENTAL FURNITURE**  
***Sermon for Pentecost 16A—Phil 2:1-13***  
LPC, 9/28/14

The human mind is a wondrous thing. From the seat of human reason and imagination come great ideas, great works of art, solutions to problems, cures for disease, and advances in knowledge of every kind. The human mind can also be narrow, hateful and evil. Or at least lazy, silly and petty.

Daily we receive news of people doing unthinkable things. Unthinkable may not be the word because obviously somebody thought them. We call them unthinkable because we have trouble understanding how anyone could think they were a good idea. We think: in what universe can it possibly be a good idea beat up your partner, sabotage the company you work for, or shoot up a school?

The answer to that question is this: the universe in which so-called “unthinkable things” are good ideas is the universe of the isolated mind.

Yes, the human mind is capable of terrific ideas. But in isolation, those ideas can be terrible. In isolation, the mind can justify acts of aggression and violence. Alternatively, in isolation, the mind can get stuck in self-destructive patterns.

The mind is like a wet towel. If you isolate it, wrap it in plastic, it turns black and rots. Only when aired does it do any good.

A healthy mind regularly shares its ideas with others, ideally with several others, or with others who have a somewhat different perspective. There are too many instances of one warped mind simply finding confirmation in one other that has the same warped tendencies. One thinks of the two young men who shot up Columbine High School.

And, too one of the tragedies of the present political situation is that people talk and listen only to others who hold the same views. This is not healthy. But that’s a subject for another time.

Today’s reading from Philippians quotes what is probably an ancient hymn about 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.”

This hymn expresses a basic Christian doctrine to which I have referred before: the doctrine of *kenosis*, which simply means self-emptying. To review this doctrine: the Son of God has coexisted with God the Father and the Holy Spirit since before time and forever. God chose to enter human history at a specific point in time as Jesus of Nazareth, a human being. To do this, God the Son had to empty himself of most of his divine properties. He did this for love of humanity, even though it meant he had to suffer and die.

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

As Paul, the author of the Letter to the Philippians, makes clear, this self-emptying of Christ provides a model for those who would follow Jesus: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

Unfortunately the Christian virtue of humility here described has been misapplied over the years. It has been used to rationalize slavery and spousal abuse, among other great sins. On a smaller scale, plenty of people attempting to practice humility have found themselves miserable and resentful.

God does not endorse slavery or abuse and God does not want God’s people to be miserable and resentful. Yet the model of the Christian life remains the self-emptying of Jesus Christ. How do we practice humility and Christ-like self-emptying in a constructive way?

I began this sermon with a discussion of the human mind and of the dangers of isolation in an attempt to get at the problem of practicing humility from another angle. I’d like to suggest that one constructive way to practice self-emptying is simply to regularly get outside your own head.

I’ve shown how dangerous it can be to get stuck in your own head, but there are milder forms of head-stuckness. St. Paul mentions some of them: selfishness, ambitiousness, conceit. All these things result from not getting out of your own mind enough. When you stay inside your own head, it’s too easy to convince yourself you’re the center of the universe, for good or ill. You need to get out.

Think of how this happens. You may be sitting around, possibly developing grandiose plans, but more likely moping about some slight, or worrying about how much you have to do, or running over some conversation again and again in your head, and a good friend calls. Unless you are really depressed, you automatically self-empty in order to respond to your friend. Even for a minute, you come out of your own head. What works even better for getting outside your own head is doing something kind for somebody else.

Self-emptying is an especially important concept when it comes to prayer. It’s perfectly all right to come to God with a list of concerns and requests. God has told us to do this. But for a lot of Christian writers, prayer time is, after the intercessions and supplications, putting aside our own concerns aside and listening for God. As St. Paul says, we are to let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus. To do this we try to empty our own minds to make room for the mind of Christ. We can’t do this unless we move our own mental furniture aside, at least for a bit, to make room for Christ’s.

I like to think of the time I spend this way, trying to tune into the mind of Christ, as time spent in heaven. I think of being lifted up for a higher perspective on the earth, and on my own situation, to see, at least in part, as God sees.

A mind may be a terrible thing to waste, but it’s a wonderful thing to open to Christ.