

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

“Like-Minded”

Philippians 2:1-5

Children are often asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” And depending on the child, the answers range from the mundane – “I don’t know” – to the sublime – “The president of the United States.” It’s a tough question to answer because a lot of the time children have no clue but the older they get the more definitive the answer seems to be.

When I taught at Lutheran High in La Verne, California, one of my responsibilities, in addition to teaching in the religion department, was counseling young people – especially vocationally. And so, I often found myself asking students, in one way or another, what they wanted to be when they grew up. How they would answer that question together with other factors would, in large part, determine the course of their future. The story is told of one young man who answered that question with “I want to be a veterinarian.” “How do you plan on doing that?” he was asked. “Well, I figure it’s pretty simple,” he said, “I’ll just give up eating meat.” He didn’t have a clue.

In a way, St. Paul is asking the same question of the Philippians in our text for today. “What do you want to be when you grow up?” He then proceeds to answer that question with a resounding “God wants you to grow up to be like Jesus.”

And that, after all, is really what God wants for all Christians, including you and me – to be like Jesus. It’s easy to focus on what God has saved us from – sin, death and the devil – but it’s a little more challenging to remember what he’s saved us for.

From the time Adam and Eve fell into sin and lost the image of God with which they were created, it was God’s intention to re-create that image through the life, death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ, in the hearts and lives of all people. In other words, it was His plan to save people to be what He created them to be in the first place. And, of course, that’s exactly what He did in and through the person and work of Jesus. And through the power of the Holy Spirit active in Word and Sacrament, people are brought to faith in this Jesus and are justified, that is, made right, with God once again. They are made right because of Jesus. But more than that, God, then, begins the process of sanctifying them, that is, of making them holy, of making them over into the very image and likeness of Jesus. And this is what God does in every Christian as they grow in Christ.

And what He seeks to do for individual Christians, He seeks to do for all Christians – as a body – as the body of Christ. It’s like what Paul says in Ephesians 4 when he says that God would have the whole body of Christ built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

This “fullness of Christ” is nothing more than the “like-mindedness” of which he speaks in our text. God would have us all be like-minded – like-minded to Christ. Now that doesn’t mean that we will all look alike or talk alike or walk alike or even act alike. In fact, the Bible also says that God has given gifts to each one of the members of the body that are different for the sake of strengthening the body. And as each member uses the gift or gifts God has given him or her faithfully, according to God’s will and purpose, the body is built up. You see, like-mindedness doesn’t mean uniformity – it means unanimity.

Paul describes this unanimity in terms of having the same love and being one in spirit and purpose. Therefore, he says, there is no room for selfishness or self-centeredness only selflessness and other-centeredness – putting others first above one self. Being able to do this, though, rests not in our own power but in the power of Christ himself and it begins with having the attitude of Christ. And just what kind of attitude is that? Well, in the verses that follow our text, Paul describes it as a humble attitude, an obedient attitude, a serving attitude, an attitude of being willing to even die for others. When each of us has that kind of attitude, he says, we will truly be like-minded for we all will have the mind of Christ. And then we will be able to work together as a body, as the body of Christ, which we are. But when we don’t have that attitude, when we think more highly of ourselves than we ought, when we either don’t know God’s will or don’t seek to do it, when we want to be served rather than to serve, when we live for ourselves and do what we want to do when we want to do it rather than to do for others when they need it done, we are not able to function as a body and the work of building up the kingdom is hampered. But when we have the mind of Christ, we can function as a body and in the process build up His kingdom here on earth.

You see, for the church to grow we each and all need to have one mind, one love, one spirit, one purpose – not mine, not yours, not anyone else’s but Christ’s – so that when people see us not only individually but also collectively, they see Christ. And seeing Christ, may they come to know for themselves the forgiveness, the new life, the salvation, that God has for them and for all.

May God grant this for Jesus’ sake. Amen.