

## **“A Beautiful Mind”**

Matthew 2:1-11, Philippians 2:5-11

“Let this same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,”

Philippians 2:5

By the Reverend. Joanna Adams  
Morningside Presbyterian Church  
Atlanta, Georgia  
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Today, the Christian church around the world celebrates one of the most colorful events of our faith heritage- the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. When Matthew tells the story, he gets so caught up in the spirit of the occasion that he has Jesus riding on two animals instead of one! Verse seven says, “The disciples brought the donkey and the colt and spread their coats upon them and Jesus sat on them.” Please do not try to solve this conundrum during the rest of my sermon this morning.

Matthew’s exuberance is balanced by his careful attention to the historical magnitude of the moment. He quotes not just one prophet but two, both Zechariah and Isaiah, to make it clear that the Messiah, the Savior for whom the people have waited for so long, is the one who is coming. “Tell the daughter of Zion that your king is coming to you mounted on a donkey.” The point is unmistakable. Royalty is on the way, but it is not the kind of royalty that the people have seen or heard of before.

Two thousand years after Jesus’ triumphal entry into the city, Germany’s last Kaiser, Kaiser Wilhelm, visited Jerusalem. His entourage was so grand that he had to have the Joppa Gate widened so that his oversized carriage could pass through. After the parade has passed through, someone attached a large sign to the Joppa Gate that read, “A better man than Wilhelm came through this city’s gate riding on a donkey.”

What made Jesus a better man? What was it about him that inspired the people to spread their cloaks and wave their branches? What was it about him then and what is it about him now that inspires millions to give their lives to him and to live for him? Never has the paradoxical beauty of the mind of Christ been more eloquently expressed than by Paul in his letter to the Philippians. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself taking the form of a servant and humbled himself becoming obedient to the point of death even death on the cross.”

Imagine that! Jesus, the Son of God, who had a position of equality with God and absolute from arbitrary forces that interrupt and upend human existence, chose not to hold on to any of that. He chose to take on vulnerability and calamity. He willingly took it all on himself and suffered death as well. His was a particularly cruel form of death. Crucifixion was an ending of life reserved by the Roman Empire for those on the outer margins, thieves and the murderers, those considered of no consequence whatsoever.

The mind of Christ was the mind of humility, a humility that was neither weakness nor meekness but a brave and faithful choice that he made of his own freewill. To use Dietrich Bonhoeffer's memorable expression, he chose to become *a man for others*. He chose to descend into the heart of human existence without counting the cost, and he made it possible for us to live as he lived.

A *New Yorker* cartoon shows God sitting majestically on a heavenly throne with the stars twinkling all around, the planet earth is visible in the distance. The Almighty is looking down to earth and saying, "Don't you make me have to come down there." But this is exactly what Christ Jesus did. In Christ, God chose to come down here. He came to live with us and die for us and for the world. If Christ did that, why would we think that we ought to live any other kind of life beside a life for others? And when you think about it, wouldn't you like to be set free from the tyranny of the Kingdom of Me, Myself, and I? What a terrible way to live-only for oneself.

It was Christ Jesus' beautiful mind that made it all possible, and his mind was nothing less than the mind of God. The mind of God put Jesus on the back of that donkey, and gave him the courage to speak the message of salvation no matter what it cost. It was the mind of God that opened his mind to see people who were being put down and shut out because of unjust practices and selfish ambition. It was his beautiful mind that caused Jesus to overturn the tables of the money changers. His mind was the source of his concern for the lame and the blind. His beautiful mind brought him to his knees before his disciples so that he could wash their feet on the night that he was betrayed. His mind led him to pray from the cross for those who took his life, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

If we belong to him, the first thing you and I must do is to get our minds right. We cannot do it on our own. It is only the power of God that can bring about such a transformation, but we can receive such a transformation as the ultimate gift of grace.

You remember the movie that Ron Howard produced several years ago that won an Academy Award, entitled, "A Beautiful Mind" and starring Ed Harris and Russell Crowe. It was the story of the brilliant Princeton mathematician who discovered a law of equilibrium that applies to both mathematics and economics. For his discovery, Professor John Fords Nash won the Nobel Prize. He was a totally brilliant man. There was just one problem with his mind. He did not have the capacity to discern the difference between what was real and what was unreal. Mental illness invaded his mind and robbed him of the ability to distinguish between reality and unreality.

It seems to me that the world struggles with a similar problem. The world cannot distinguish between what real power is and what it is not. There The world thinks that real power is power you can leverage or earn or purchase or demonstrate by military invasion. Exactly the opposite is the case. Look at the one who reveals the true nature of God and of human beings. Jesus Christ refuses to grasp for status. He sets aside revenge. He acts without an eye for gain. He adopts a posture of humility and radically challenges the values and assumptions of the society that he is a part.

"Have the same mind in you that was in Christ Jesus," Paul says. To receive the gift of a Christ-like mind is the ongoing spiritual discipline of a holy life.

What does it look like as it is lived out in the world? We see it clearly in the great saints and martyrs we admire, like Albert Schweitzer and Mother Teresa, but I am wondering if we don't see it manifested around ourselves in more ordinary ways. In a wonderful book entitled *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*. William Placher offers an illustration from the world of basketball. Think about how it is in basketball that the players who think only of themselves and who say, "How am I doing?" "When can I get the ball?" "When can I be the cowboy and make the best shot?" are not the ones who reach their potential in the game of basketball. It is those who lose themselves in the spirit of their team, those who play with a kind of self-forgetfulness, just as an artist becomes lost in her work or a lover becomes lost in his beloved, or you, at your office, get excited about participating in a common enterprise. It is in that self-forgetfulness that human beings become most fully themselves.

I read about one of the fastest growing churches in the world with branches in 32 nations. It is called the "Winners' Church." The leaders say that its motto comes from America's religious culture. Here's the motto, "Be happy. Be successful. Join the winners." It all depends on how you define winning, of course. I wonder what kind of church you would have if your motto were: "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant."

How about this one? "Those who want to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their life for my sake will find them."

In the years that I have been a minister, I have known some winning churches and lots of winners in them. One who comes to mind is a young man in the first church I served. He was an advertising executive and wore the best looking clothes I have ever seen. He was on the move in his profession. For some reason, he decided that every Tuesday night he would volunteer for the foot clinic at the night shelter at our church. I can picture him now in my mind's eye sitting on a stool before the chair on which one of our homeless guests was sitting. I wonder if you can see him. He takes the guest's feet, puts them in a bowl of warm, soapy water, and then he takes a towel and dries the guest's feet. He applies ointment to the sores. The ritual ends with a gift of clean, white socks, which Robert puts on the guest's feet.

Sometimes the guest would weep because he had not been touched with tenderness for as long as he could remember. I once asked Robert why he worked at the foot clinic every week. He brushed me aside, saying, "I don't know. I figure I have a better chance of running into Jesus here than most places, I guess." As I watched him week after week, I realized that I was having developing double vision. I was seeing Christ in the stranger and also seeing Christ in the one who was finding the true meaning of his life in serving others. To see what the world cannot see, then to do something about these are the marks of a beautiful mind.

Why did Jesus ride that little donkey into town? I think he did it to demonstrate true greatness to all the world. After the donkey came the cross, and believe you me, there you see greatness in all its glory.

In a moment, we are going to recite the Apostles' Creed, "He was crucified, dead and buried; he descended into hell." But after the truth of the suffering and the death are expressed, comes the glad affirmation that "he rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven." In the descent and

the ascent, the great reversal of human history occurred. The servant became Lord; the humiliated one, the exalted one.

He ascended up into heaven, but he didn't get there the easy way, did he? What a journey he had. The gospels tell us that as he entered Jerusalem that day so long ago, the whole city was in turmoil. The English words were too mild for the meaning of the word. The Greek for the word, "turmoil" was used in reference to violent changes in the weather or earthquakes. In other words, when Jesus came into town, the whole world shook-a fundamental shift took place, and nothing has ever been the same.

Who is this? the people wonder as he enters the city. He is earthquake, wind, and fire. He is majesty. He is lowliness. He is everything that ought to shape our lives and our life together. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna to the son of David!

Let us pray:

In your mercy you have come so close to us, O God, in Christ Jesus. No wonder they waved their branches long ago. Will you come to us now? Into the heart of our cities, will you come? Into our troubled world, will you come? Beside the hospital bed, into the brokenness of our lives, will you come? We wait for you in hope. All glory, laud and honor to you and to your son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the power of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.