

## The Divine Economy – Ben Wayman

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 15:1-39

Adam Smith was an 18<sup>th</sup> century social philosopher who is perhaps most responsible for how Americans understand economics today. Smith is best known for his economic theory of “an invisible hand,” which basically maintains that when an individual pursues her own self-interest, she does what is best for society as a whole. When I first learned about Adam Smith in a high school economics class, I thought the man was brilliant. He not only justified my own self-interest, but claimed it was necessary for the good of the community. I have since come to realize that I was thoroughly confused about Christianity.

Were the apostle Paul to live in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, he would surely have seen Smith’s economic teaching to be in sharp opposition to the gospel. In his letter to the Christians in Philippi, Paul encouraged them to “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” Paul makes it clear that the mind of Christ is set on something entirely different than his own self-interest.

So today, on Palm Sunday, I would like for us to consider what it might mean for us to take on the mind of Christ.

When I was in seminary, I had a professor who had a knack for pointing out strange things Christians say. He often drew attention to a common saying among Christian parents that goes something like this: “I don’t care what my daughter believes when she grows up; I just want her to learn to think for herself.” To which my professor would exclaim, “Why in the world would you want her to do that? Have you no convictions that you believe are true and worth teaching your daughter?” My professor would then expand on this point by saying: “I don’t want you to learn to think for yourselves. I want you to learn to think like me.”

A teaching philosophy like this one is sure to raise suspicions for modern American Christians, who, following Adam Smith, prize individuality above the community. We moderns have been trained to think that our ideas are good just by virtue of the fact that they belong to us. There are a number of problems with this train of thought, but this morning, I only want to point out one: it’s not Christian.

When my professor made the seemingly arrogant claim that he wanted us to think like him, my American sensibilities were offended in much the same way that they were when I read the apostle Paul saying in his letter to the Christians in Corinth, “Imitate me, as I imitate Christ.” Just who does Paul think he is, saying something like this?

Paul thinks he is a Christian. And he thinks that being a Christian is not about thinking for oneself, but is essentially about imitation. This is why parents should be delighted when their children copy the words they say. Rather than be annoyed, parents should see this as an invitation for their child to learn to speak like a Christian.

Our lesson today from Philippians is one of scripture's best examples of how early Christians learned to speak Christian. The passage is known as the "Christ hymn" and is believed to be one of the earliest creeds that Christians learned to say about God. If you have a NRSV translation of this passage before you, you will notice that the editors have placed this block of material in poetic form in order to convey the rhythm and meter of the song. This is how early Christians learned to speak Christian – they sang a song about God's self-emptying love for the world.

When Paul rehearses this hymn for the Christians in Philippi, he is reminding them that if they want to think rightly, they need to strive side by side with one another in learning to think like Christ. Paul is not the least interested in the individual mindsets of the Christians in Philippi. He is interested in the mind of Christ and how the Christians of Philippi can learn to think as Christ did.

By reading the previous three verses we get a better idea of what Paul means here by "the mind of Christ." In verses two, three and four, Paul states, "be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 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." In just three verses, Paul helps us see Adam Smith's "invisible hand" as a clenched fist raised against Christ.

For Paul, the Christ hymn is the economic model for Christian community. Full of love, Christ unselfishly emptied himself and in humility considered us, rather than himself. Rejecting his own self-interest, Christ embraced us. This is how God thinks. God is not self-interested, but deeply in love with us. In Christ, God expressed his love for the world at God's own expense.

This is, on its own, enough to challenge us this morning. I have been so shaped by the economy of looking after my own interests first, that to reorient myself to see others and their needs first requires an overhaul of my habits and way of thinking. Alone, I do not have the resources to rethink my American "duty" to look first to my own needs. But thankfully, God has given us each other, the church. When we live together, striving with one another to take on the mind of Christ, we receive the full resources God gives the church to imitate Christ.

It is critical to note that imitating Christ is not about individual heroism, but communal imitation. Writing his letter from a jail cell, Paul makes it clear that he is no hero; he is merely sharing in the suffering that thinking like Christ brings. So when Paul addresses the Philippians' suffering at the end of chapter one, he encourages them by saying "you are having the same struggle

that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.” Paul explains that suffering is what happens when we together share the mind of Christ and face a world that is bent toward itself. Because we live in a world that is bent on its own self-interest, Paul makes it clear that taking on the mind of Christ is going to require courage. Just a few verses before the Christ hymn (1:28), Paul encourages the Philippian Christians not to be intimidated by their aggressors because **“For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of *your* salvation.”** This is the good news. Paul is saying that when we live in a way that calls into question the world’s most cherished commitment to self-interest, we will face persecution. But this persecution is evidence of our salvation. In every single passage this morning we see that for those who focus on the interests of others rather than their own self-interest, they have been hated by the world. So what kind of a people is capable of living so vulnerably in a violent world?

Paul’s answer to this question is clear: it’s us – the church. By imitating Christ as a community, we show the world a real alternative to its self-interested ways.

Stan was a friend of mine from seminary who once shared that a member of his home congregation had AIDS. Stan’s church was in the AME tradition, and in his church, they celebrated communion weekly, sharing one chalice. When the man informed the church of his condition, the church decided to meet and pray about how this might affect how the church should have communion. You might imagine a number of possible responses. After prayer and reflection, the church decided that this man with AIDS should receive communion **FIRST** every week because it was he who was most at risk for getting sick due to his compromised immune system.

When the church takes on the mind of Christ, we not only become much more interesting, but we become a people capable of living in a much bigger world.

Today’s lesson from Isaiah is known as the third suffering servant song. Like the Christ hymn, this passage is also a song with rhythm and meter. Here we encounter the Servant Prophet who has set his face “like flint” toward God because he has discovered that the life that God makes possible is much bigger than the one he could live left to his own devices. But as a result of his turning to God, he is struck by an aggressor because in so doing, he has left himself unguarded. Unconcerned for his own self-interest, the prophet’s beard is pulled as his cheeks are made vulnerable because his attention is fixed on God rather than his adversary. Choosing to stand courageously before God, the prophet is insulted and spit upon because he has chosen not to hide. In this suffering servant song, we see the prophet who has discovered that the violence of the world cannot compare to the love of God.

In today’s Gospel lesson we see scripture’s clearest presentation of God’s love for a people violently committed to their own self-interest. Jesus’ love for the world was so amazing compared to the world’s self-interested way of life that he was killed for it. Our Gospel lesson today shows how God is so intensely in love with us that God refuses to save himself from our violence.

Today's readings make it difficult to see how the mind of Christ can result in anything other than tragedy. The very people whom Jesus came to save respond by shouting, **Crucify him! Crucify him!** A bandit connected to murder is chosen over Jesus for release. Jesus is flogged and ridiculed as an imitator King. He is struck, spat upon, and worshiped in jest. He is derided by passersby, mocked by his chosen people and taunted by the criminals crucified alongside him.

Palm Sunday reminds us that we are the palm-waving, fickle followers of Jesus, too often more interested in ourselves than in God and the world he loved so deeply.

But despite our self-love and rejection of Christ, God still loves us. In his letter to the Christians in Philippi, Paul shows how God transforms our tragic self-interest into a beautiful story of salvation. When we read our Gospel lesson in light of Paul's letter, we see that **our self-interest leads only to death and destruction, and that the crucifixion is evidence of our salvation.**

In the crucifixion, God transforms the tragedy of the world's self-interest into the beauty of his self-emptying love. Palm Sunday is not ultimately about our self-interested crucifixion of Christ, but about the mind of Christ that is dead-set on God's love for us. The beauty of Palm Sunday can be seen through the lenses of the suffering servant song of Isaiah and the Christ hymn of Philippians: Jesus' crucifixion is God's love song to us.

While Mark's account may not have the rhythm and meter of the Suffering Servant song or the Christ hymn, it conveys how God loved us at the point of our deepest infidelity to him. In Christ's crucifixion, the height of God's love meets us at our deepest failure. We have not merely chosen ourselves over God, but we have chosen to put God to death.

This is the last Sunday of Lent. Our lessons today help us see that Lent is not a temporary time of self-denial, but a time of intensified practice in taking on the mind of Christ. Lent provides the opportunity for us to live lives for God and others, rather than in self-protection and self-promotion. This Sunday we are invited to take on the mind of Christ: to think like God, who will think of nothing other than his love for us, no matter the cost.