

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 18
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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
Like Christ

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being united in spirit, and having one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility consider one another better than yourselves. Let each of you look carefully not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Indeed, let this attitude be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus. Though he was by nature God, he did not consider equality with God as a prize to be displayed, but he emptied himself by taking the nature of a servant. When he was born in human likeness, and his appearance was like that of any other man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

—Philippians 2:1-11

“Sometimes I dream ... that he is me ... you got to see that’s how I dream to be ... I dream I move ... I dream I groove like Mike ... If I could be like Mike.” Do any of you remember that Gatorade commercial from the 90s? The kids probably don’t know that commercial unless they saw it on YouTube, which you can still do. I think I first saw it in 1991. I was a freshman in high school. And I remember how I and my friends wanted to be like Mike, Michael Jordan, of course. We guzzled Gatorade because we wanted to be “like Mike.”

But how much “like Mike” am I really? Well, Michael Jordan has hands and feet. I’ve got hands and feet. I’m like Mike, right? Mike has eyes and ears. I’ve got eyes and ears. I’m like Mike, right? Mike has legs and a brain. Guess what? So, do I! I’m like Mike, right?

So, my friends and I would go the basketball court, and certainly I could go up with my right hand for a layup and bring the ball down and put it up with my left hand, right? Except that I ended up losing the ball. I would drive the lane and bring the ball around my waist, but I couldn’t finish the layup. And dunking the ball? I had some ups in high school. But the only ball I could ever dunk was a ping-pong ball.

Like Mike? Mike has supreme athletic ability and unparalleled mental fortitude. I don’t have those things. And without those characteristics to inform my hands and feet and eyes and ears and legs and brain as I try to be “like Mike” on a basketball court, it turns out I’m a very poor representation of Mike, to say the least. Some might even say I don’t look or act “like Mike” at all.

But here’s something that is even more critical than aspiring to be “like Mike.” The apostle Paul exhorts us to be “like Christ.” That’s an even greater ask, isn’t it? If I could be like Christ... I mean, he’s the Son of God. He doesn’t just fly through the air, he created the air. He doesn’t just throw down a basketball, he throws down Satan. He doesn’t just win championships, he wins the eternal warfare.

And Paul exhorts us today, **“Indeed, let this attitude be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.”** In other words, be like Christ. We are to have the mindset of Christ Jesus. Just think about that. We are to have the same attitude, the same mindset of Christ Jesus. Like Christ.

Well, what is that attitude? Even though he is in the very nature God, his mindset isn’t superiority. Even though he is God, his mindset is an attitude of service. Even though he is **“God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,”** his mindset says, “Whatever they need, I will give.”

Oh, this goes contrary to everything we see in this world. In order to see things from Jesus’ perspective, we don’t climb up above everyone else and look down on them. No. From Jesus’ perspective, we go beneath everyone else and look up.

It's an attitude of humility. It's valuing others above yourselves. Does that sound strange to you? I'm going to guess it doesn't. I'm going to guess you know that. Why? Because the Holy Spirit has opened your eyes to see what kind of God we have.

He is the Maker of heaven and earth, and all things are under his feet. But that doesn't make him self-serving. His mindset is still this: "Whatever they need, I'll give."

Even as the apostle Paul describes here in Philippians 2, Jesus willingly stoops down to a manger and even goes down far lower than that. He goes to sub-human territory, even to death on a cross.

Oh, that seems backwards, doesn't it? The Maker of heaven and earth makes himself nothing, and then less than nothing? That seems entirely backwards. But you get it. You know it. You believe it and you treasure it because the Holy Spirit has opened your eyes to see it.

And we get it, too, I think, when God through the apostle Paul exhorts us to have the same mindset, to have the same attitude, to be like Christ. We recognize that God did not build us to look down on others and see them as objects from which to take no matter how much it hurts them. No. God didn't create us to have a "me-first" attitude. God has molded the Christian's heart to the exact same shape as his own heart.

And do you know what that means? That makes my neighbor's need my number one priority. **"Do nothing ... nothing out of selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility consider one another better than yourselves. Let each of you look carefully not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."**

To all of us here today, I would say that's a good reminder, right? But that's nothing particularly mind-blowing because God has opened our eyes to see. But still, easier said than done, right?

Now, this isn't just bringing your spouse or parents breakfast in bed. This isn't just signing up to serve in church. God isn't first and foremost addressing actions here as much as the heart from which the actions flow. The real question here is, "When I serve, whose interest do I have at heart? My own or the interests of others?"

The ultimate picture of my service is when the only positive thing that can come from my service is when the needs of my neighbor are served, period. When I'm two days short of sleep and five days behind on my personal schedule, and when I'm just about ready to climb into bed, I get a phone call from the person who has caused me the most problems on the face of the planet asking me for help. And in the middle of the night, I put my clothes back on and go to serve them, only to face criticism and ridicule the whole time with no "thank you" at the end. That's an ideal moment to test where my interests lie. How well does my mindset align with Christ Jesus, the one who went all the way down to death on the cross?

And let's just trace his way down. Let's start at the very end. The religious leaders who were supposed to be servants of God, they were the ones who concocted the plan. And the government that was supposed to exercise justice, they were the one who condemned an innocent one to death. And one of his closest friends sells him for a few coins, another one denies him with curses, and all the rest of his friends desert him in fear. Nobody is saying, "Hey, keep up the good work, Jesus, you're almost there." Nobody is saying, "Thank you, Jesus."

And even though he was by very nature God, he stayed the course. And that's what the apostle Paul has in mind when he says "Be like Christ." That in your relationships with one another God wants you to have the same mindset as Christ Jesus when he became obedient to death on a cross.

Now let's be clear, he's not saying that you need to die on a cross like Christ. But he is saying that you are to have the same attitude toward others as Jesus had for you when he died on the cross for you. Not a hint of self-interest in your heart. Only love. **"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility consider one another better than yourselves."** "Whatever they need, I'll give." Even when the only positive thing that comes from my service is that the needs of my service are served.

This is a mindset that is desperately needed in a world that has perverted love from a "What can I do for you" attitude to a "What can I get from you" attitude. This mindset is needed in a world that has distorted service from a means to filling my neighbor's needs to a means of fulfilling my own needs in self-fulfillment.

And we in this church need that realignment, too. Because we are all too inclined to jump on that societal wave of that self-absorbed selfishness.

But Paul doesn't hold out Jesus here only as an example to teach us how to serve. He also holds out Jesus to show how much God loves and serves us. Think of what prompted Jesus to leave his throne in heaven and take

on our humanity so that he could fit inside a little manger and die on a cross. That was not a quest for self-fulfillment. That was a quest for you. You had nothing to offer him except sin and scorn and bitterness and selfishness.

You didn't have anything to offer him, but even so, Jesus didn't **consider equality with God as something to be used for his own advantage, but for your advantage**. His mindset toward you was "Whatever you need, I will give."

Follow the circle. As a result of the mindset of Christ Jesus, he humbled himself and became obedient to death for you. And as a result of his death on the cross, he has forgiven you all your sins of bitterness and scorn and selfishness. And as a result of his forgiving love, that circle is completed and you share his mindset. Like Christ. I want to be like Christ.

You see, the mindset of Christ Jesus is not something that God pulls out of you as you fight against it all the way. The mindset of Christ Jesus is what God has molded your heart into because of Jesus.

Did you notice all the "ifs" in the first verse? There were four "ifs". But Paul doesn't use the word "if" to suggest that you may not have those things. This is a rhetorical device to get you thinking. Essentially, he says, "**Since there is encouragement in Christ, since there is comfort from his love, since there is fellowship with the Spirit, since there is affection and compassion...**"

He's telling you that you have all those things. By humbling himself to meet all your needs, and by his subsequent exaltation over all things to continue to meet all your needs, Jesus has liberated you so that you can meet your neighbor's needs. The one who went to death for you is back on his throne, and his attitude toward you hasn't changed one bit. "Whatever you need, I'll give."

That gives us a completely different mindset. Even though it may feel as though God has left you to love alone in this loveless world, he hasn't. As the exalted Lord, he's still with you. He still lives in you.

And unlike Michael Jordan who has no power to change my life to be like Mike, Christ has the power to change my life to be like Christ. And that means that whatever you need, he will give. That liberates you to pass it on, not looking to your own interests, but each of you looking to the interests of others. Like Christ. I want to be like Christ. Amen.