

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
FIFTHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE CHRIST-LIKE?”
Philippians 2:1-11
September 25, 2011
9:00 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES

According to the Apostle Paul, not only must we be like Christ, we must also think like Christ. There are some who say we should look at Jesus' life simply as a good example. Others believe in a “*Christ in me*” mysticism wherein Christ thinks and acts through us. But a middle way is to see Christ is to view him as both our example and our inspiration. Having the mind of Christ is to learn from his example, and to also be open to his spiritual presence and leadership.

We just celebrated our centennial year here at Park Hill. One hundred years of unbroken Christian service to our community. We have a building and a legacy. Pentecost was the birthday of the church, but it had precious little institutional framework. Therefore, the New Testament defines the church in spiritual terms. The church was wherever the Spirit was, wherever two or more were gathered in Christ's name, where the gospel was proclaimed, and where the people gathered in *koinonia*, the Greek word for fellowship. This fellowship was based on a different way of loving, called *agape*, which is not primarily a feeling, but a choice and a commitment. In the true church the world finds the mind of Christ.

When you go to London you can visit a church known as St. Martin-in-the-Fields. Despite its name, the church is now located on one of the great squares in the heart of the city. From 1914 to 1926 the church was served by its best-known vicar, Hugh Richard Lawrie Sheppard, popularly known as Dick Sheppard. He was gregarious, had a strong sense of humor, and was a doer. He said the churches often failed because they “**loved the souls of people but not people themselves.**” He wanted a worldly church, open to the people on the streets, the broken, the poor, as well as the privileged. He pioneered in radio broadcasting and used drama. George Bernard Shaw said Sheppard could have had a career on the stage. Much of Dick Sheppard's vision was realized. His biographer, Richard Ellis Roberts wrote: “**St Martin's became the church of the soldiers and the down-**

and-outs; the church of the classes and the masses; . . . the church for the cheerful and the church for the desperate; . . . for the healthy and the sick. . . . the congregation was no more shocked at hearing the minister pray for street-walkers than for school-teachers, for crooks than for clergy, for blackguards than for bishops. It became a refuge for the unhappy, and the home of the homeless. In short, it was a Christian church.”

What is the implication here? Is it possible that some churches are not “**Christian**”? Or is it possible that all churches that call themselves “**Christian**” do not live up to their name? What is it that makes a church distinctively “**Christian**”? It is because it cares for the people that Jesus cared about? Can a church be truly “**Christian**” if it exists only for itself?

It is a paradox. Living organisms do not die from giving themselves away. It doesn't matter whether they are individuals, groups, or institutions. A sure path to death for any organism is to live only for itself. Isn't this what Jesus taught? Of course, we say that self-preservation is the first law of nature. And yes that's true. But self-preservation does not mean total self-absorption, narcissism run amok. Self-preservation involves a balance of inner-directed and outer-directed energies. Look at the church! We come together for mutual love and nurture in the Spirit of God. We are the body of Christ, called to care for one another, using our gifts to build up the body. In the novel *Kon-Tiki* a group of people on a raft at sea discover they can shut out the immensities of the ocean and the terrors of the storm by huddling together in a tiny cabin. But this practice is temporary, at best. Just so, the church that finds life and strength together is called out into the world, called to turn itself inside out, away from the concern about its own security. The church is called into the storm, to quit playing it safe, and to take the risks that Christ's love demands. That's exactly what Park Hill did.

The Apostle Paul challenged the church at Philippi to have the mind of Christ. ***“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.”*** But who could possibly have the mind of Christ? Paul himself, perhaps, but look at what happened to him on the road to Damascus. He had the supreme conversion experience! Read it again! Paul did not become a Christian on the Damascus road. That experience left him confused and blind. His conversion required a human agent, someone with the mind of Christ. Ananias came as Christ's ambassador. He restored Paul's sight, interpreted what was happening, and baptized him. When anyone encounters Christ there is always a human agent involved. The ministry of Ananias to Paul was not just a telling. Nor was it only a doing. It involved verbal communication, physical assistance, and a great deal of

caring. That defines Park Hill. **“We are an inclusive community of faith, embracing diversity, service, unconditional acceptance and the care and support of all people.”**

William Temple said that Christianity is the most materialistic of all religions. He was saying that, unlike religions that seek God in some escape from the physical world, our faith is about finding God in and through the world of actual persons and real things. What did God become in Christ? Not a vision. Not a mystical presence. Not a transcendental guide out of this world. In Christ, God became a flesh and blood human being. He was as real as you. To the extent that we are Christ’s church, then, we are the stewards of Christ’s life.

The city of Amarillo is located in what generations of travelers have called **“the middle of nowhere.”** It is in the panhandle of Texas and has endured years of verbal abuse and bad weather. Carl Bates was a Baptist pastor there sixty years or more ago. He loved trains, which comes in handy in Amarillo. On one long journey, Bates fell into conversation with a uniformed worker on the train. He asked about the various responsibilities of the railway personnel. Finally, Bates asked the man about his own position. **“What are you called?”** The man said he was the steward. **“And what does the steward do?”** asked Rev. Bates. The man replied, **“The steward takes care of the boss’s business until we get to the end of the line.”** Carl Bates said that out of that conversation came the best sermon on the church he every preached.

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.

The radical nature of Christ’s love is movingly expressed in the words of the Apostle Paul. Christ, the eternal Logos, had no desire to seek equality with God, even though he was one with God. Rather, he emptied himself and took on the form of a servant, becoming human. As a human he humbled himself and became obedient, even to the extent of suffering death on a cross. Paul suggests the possibility that we can have the same mind as Christ. Whether we can or not, it is the way to eternal life.

Missed opportunities can have unfortunate results. It makes a tremendous difference, however, what caused them. If missing an opportunity was not our fault, it is much easier to accept. We couldn’t help it. But if missing an opportunity was due to forgetfulness, negligence, or procrastination, we may never make peace with it.

I can't afford to miss the opportunity of letting you know that I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.