

“The Mind of Christ”
Third Sunday in Lent
Philippians 2:1-11

Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Saint Paul, Minnesota
March 8, 2026

This week, we learned that some of our military commanders were telling our soldiers that the purpose of the war in Iran was to prompt the apocalypse and the return of Christ. Now, this idea raises deep concerns about the separation of church and state. We learned about it because some soldiers filed formal complaints that it violated their freedom of conscience.

It also is, I believe, a very bad and deeply flawed interpretation of the Book of Revelation. But, I’m not going to shift course today and do a Bible study on the end times. What’s relevant for today is that the image of Jesus conveyed by these commanders is so different from what we encounter here in Philippians 2.

As we’ve said before, we are living in a time when what it means to confess Jesus and to follow Jesus is contested in the public square. Christian Nationalisms present to us a very different image of Jesus than what we just read. According to Paul, Jesus emptied himself, becoming like a slave. Gave up the divine power and status that was his, and humbled himself. Paul also teaches us that as followers of this Jesus, we are to have the same mind. Which means that we are to do nothing from selfish ambition or vain conceit but instead to regard others as better than ourselves. That humility is what it means to confess Jesus as Lord.

In this passage, Paul quotes an early Christian hymn, as he encourages the recipients of his letter to be more like Christ. That beautiful hymn concludes by evoking an image of every knee bowing and every tongue confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord. Now, in our pluralistic, universalist age, maybe that image unsettles us a little. Maybe it seems to be an image of domination, resonating more with the notions of the Christian nationalists. But, I don’t believe that is the case. In his book on progressive Christian theology, Congregationalist pastor David Kaden actually uses precisely this image in order to highlight the universal love ethic of the Christian faith. That this image is really about uplifting the dignity of every human person, so that all people might flourish. Kaden interprets the image in this way by first noting how explicitly political the idea is of all humanity confessing Jesus as Lord. For if all humanity is confessing Jesus as Lord, then they are *not* confessing Caesar as Lord. Kaden takes this claim as Paul’s subversion of all earthly powers that try to command our absolute loyalty and obedience. Paul is, instead, imagining something very different than our current world of violence and domination. By taking Jesus as Lord, instead of Caesar, we embrace the values by which Jesus lived. And those values are not power, control, and violence, but rather are compassion, humility, and love. Kaden writes, “To claim that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not, is to lay hold of a different way of being in the world, to see the world through a different set of lenses, to catch a glimpse of a different vision, the vision of Jesus.”

By taking Jesus as our Lord and following him, we are proposing an alternative way of being in the world. One that fits with everything else Paul is saying in this chapter about humility, sacrifice, and our concern for others. Here’s David Kaden again:

The statement ‘Jesus is Lord’ should . . . be interpreted in a compassionate way, a way that *uplifts human personality*. Read in this way, the statement functions as a symbol to declare that the way of Jesus, according to Paul, is the way to a life lived compassionately, lovingly, and inclusively.

So, for us to confess that Jesus is Lord, we are rejecting and subverting all earthly powers that would degrade the dignity of human beings. And, instead, we are committing ourselves to doing the good work of

building a better, more spacious world for all. A place of compassion, where human personality is uplifted, and all are capable of flourishing.

For Lent this year, I've invited us into an exploration of our humanity and what it means for us to flourish as God intends for us. How do we open ourselves to experience the full, rich blessings of God? And how do we create a better world for everyone?

In her book *Abundant Lives*, sociologist Amanda Udis-Kessler emphasizes that the kingdom of God makes demands upon us. That if we are to flourish and to achieve that better world, there is individual work that we followers of Jesus must do. She lists three primary tasks for us—"cultivating our virtues, healing our psychic wounds, and growing in faith." In order to achieve our own well-being, and also in order to most effectively help others to flourish, we have the individual responsibilities to develop the virtues, heal emotionally, and strengthen our faith and spiritual practice. Over the next three weeks of Lent, we'll talk about each of these in turn, but today I'm focused on cultivating the virtues.

What are the primary virtues we need to work on and how do we do that?

Udis-Kessler highlights four key virtues for the follower of Christ—compassion, courage, generosity, and humility. Her description of generosity focuses not on money, but, instead, on our overall approach to the world. She writes that "cultivating generosity of spirit involves learning to see people as more than their worst attributes, beliefs, values, and actions." Now, isn't that challenging? I do think it resonates with what Paul is teaching here in Philippians. We must learn to see others, as best we can, as God sees them. And how does God see them? God loves each and every human being. God views each and every human being as God's beloved child. God desires that each and every person live their best, flourishing life.

Now, I'll admit that can be a difficult challenge for us to view all people the same way God does. There are those who annoy and irritate us. Those who get on our nerves. Also those who harm us, oppress us, who truly are our enemies. To have generosity of spirit for them is a difficult assignment. I think back to my time pastoring in Oklahoma City twenty years ago when I was one of the leading public spokespersons for the LGBTQ community, which meant I was often the target of anti-gay forces, including various elected officials.

In February 2009 I was chaplain for the day for the Oklahoma House of Representatives. The first openly gay minister to fill that role. There are lots of rules and protocols when one performs that job, and I had followed them. That included asking permission of the Speaker to introduce one's guests in the gallery, which included my family, some friends, and my then boyfriend soon to be husband. Near the close of business that day when my representative made the standard motion to enter my prayer into the record by consent, there was an objection. Which then led to a vote on the floor of the House whether to accept my prayer into the record or not. A handful of representatives voted against my prayer. It became a news story for a week, my fifteen minutes of fame. It was particularly annoying when an opinion writer for the *Washington Post* said I shouldn't have introduced my boyfriend.

Later that year, when the state Republican party released their platform, they commended those who had voted against my prayer and denounced both my prayer and my marriage. I don't mean they denounced gay marriage in general, though they did that too. I mean the state Republican party platform denounced *my* marriage. So, living and working and ministering in an environment like that, I had to constantly remind myself that those people who challenged me in the public square were also beloved children of God. And that takes work. Emotional, spiritual, even sometimes physical work. It definitely builds character. But that's the kind of good, hard work that Jesus calls us to, if we are to achieve a better world.

About the virtue of compassion, Udis-Kessler writes: To be compassionate is to be open and vulnerable enough to the suffering of others that we allow that suffering to disturb, impact, and change us—to get us out of our heads, to touch our hearts, and to knot our stomachs—with the result that we take concrete actions to ease the suffering we encounter.

Again, here's this emphasis on being open, of seeing others, of getting outside of our self-concern alone, and of being moved to action on behalf of others. Over and over again the Christian ethic of flourishing is about cultivating the ability to see and make space for each other, so that we might live the lives that God has dreamed for us.

Udis-Kessler actually placed humility first in her list of virtues to cultivate, but I wanted to get to it last, so we could spend a little more time on it, especially since humility seems to be the core virtue Paul is uplifting here in Philippians 2. Now, humility has long been misunderstood to mean “thinking less of one's self.” That would not be a virtue; that would be a vice. Humility, accurately understood, means cultivating a proper sense of self and one's self-worth in relation to other people, who are also worthy. Here's how Udis-Kessler characterizes the virtue: “Humility can be a way of understanding ourselves in relation to other people: all inherently equal to one another morally, all deserving of the opportunity to flourish, all part of a larger mystery in which we are equally valued and valuable.” When humility is understood this way, then we see that having a healthy sense of self is essential to it. A person lacking in self-esteem is not practicing the virtue of humility. And it becomes clear that the vice of pride is to think and act as if one is worth more than other human beings and to constantly place one's self-interests ahead of other people's dignity and opportunities to flourish. That can of pride can lead to injustice, oppression, domination, and violence.

A decade ago David Brooks published *The Road to Character*. In it he explored what we can learn about virtue and the good life from significant figures like President Eisenhower, Katharine Graham, and Bayard Rustin. At the end of the book, he drew all the lessons together in what he described as “a coherent image of what to live for and how to live” and he named it “The Humility Code.” In this Humility Code, he claimed that the long road to moral character begins with an accurate sense of ourselves, which means that humility is the greatest virtue and pride the central vice. And that the moral struggle against the sin of pride and to cultivate humility is *the way* that our character is built over our lifetimes. He wrote, “If you make disciplined, caring choices, you are slowly engraving certain tendencies into your mind.” In other words, we have to learn to resist temptations that lead us astray and instead keep ourselves anchored to the lasting things. Brooks's Humility Code is a long, detailed list of how to cultivate moral character and the good life, and it's worthy of your attention.

David Brooks is not a Christian (he is Jewish) so his advice is not about cultivating the mind of Christ. But I find much that resonates in his moral theory with what I read in Paul's letter to the Philippians. To cultivate the virtues is part of the good, hard work that we are called to. It does mean learning to resist temptation, to discipline ourselves, to make wise choices, and to struggle with the flaws in our human nature. This is how our character is built over time. And as we do that work, we experience more of the good life that God intends *and* we become better, more effective, and helpful agents at securing the good life for others.

We now live in an age when to speak of moral character and virtues like humility, generosity, and compassion seems almost quaint if not naïve. It truly seems as if we occupy a different moral world. One in which violence, domination, even cruelty command the center. But, I believe, the moral world we inhabit is the better one, the more expansive one, the one in which humanity can truly flourish and experience the life of joy and delight that God desires for us.

So, when we uphold these virtues and this moral vision, we are subverting and resisting the current modes of domination and power. When we cultivate these virtues, we are developing the mind of Christ, following in the way of Jesus.

Therefore,

If there is any comfort in Christ,

any consolation from love,

any partnership in the Spirit,

any tender affection and sympathy,

make joy complete:

be of the same mind,

having the same love,

being in full accord and of one mind.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty 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.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.