

Let This Mind Be In You
Rev. Gordon Peerman
September 28, 2008

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

The late David Foster Wallace, in a brilliant commencement address at Kenyon College a few years back, spoke of questioning what he called his “deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe, the real-est, most vivid, and most important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness because it is so socially repulsive. But it’s pretty much the same for all of us. It’s our default setting, hard-wired into our boards from birth. Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute center of. The world as you experience it is there in front of YOU or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV or YOUR monitor. And so on. Other people’s thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, your own are so immediate, urgent, and real.”

Simply put, the reason spiritual practice is so challenging is that we are working with this default setting of self-centeredness, self-absorption, what the Jewish mystical tradition calls *mochin d’katnut*, narrow mind. And my experience is that David Foster Wallace is right on, that this narrow, self-concerned mind is the default setting for *all* of us, from the most altruistic to the least generous. All of us just can’t help seeing things first in terms of how we want them. The problem is not that we have preferences for wanting things to be a certain way, for wanting our candidate to come out on top, for example, but that we turn these preferences into *requirements* that things go our way. That the traffic be the way *I* want it, that you shape up and be the way *I* want you, that

reality be the way *I* want it. This requirement that reality be other than it is, this is a big recipe for suffering.

Letting go of this narrow mind into spacious mind, what Jews call *mochin d'gadlut*, what Buddhists call Big Mind, and what we call the mind of Christ, is the antidote to this suffering.

The epistle for today gives us a description of what this process of letting go of the demand that reality be other than it is actually looks like. “Let this mind be in you, which was in Christ Jesus, who did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” So emptying myself of self-centeredness, emptying myself of all my complaints about the way things are, about the way you are, about the way I am, emptying myself of the narrow mind, this is the way of the cross. If you don't think this is challenging, just make a vow to refrain from voicing any complaint for a twenty-four hour period. Start now, and check back in with me in a day or so and let me know how you're doing. Maybe you're already complaining about this idea of mine.

Now a note of caution: this invitation to empty yourself of self-preoccupation is not, though it has been mistaken for, a summons to passivity or masochism. Jesus is anything but passive in today's gospel, and it was sheer genius on the part of somebody to pair *this* epistle with *this* gospel. The chief priests and the elders want to trap Jesus with a question, and he says, “OK, I'll answer your question if you answer *mine*.” He doesn't let himself get pushed around; he's nobody's victim and nobody's fool. His interrogators see that with Jesus, there's somebody at home. So the emptying we're talking about is *not* for you to be someone's doormat. It *is* about emptying yourself of

the demand that someone be anything other than who or what they are, and instead taking up the *harder work* of defining who or what you will be. Jesus defines himself by asking a question of his own. When the chief priests and the elders refuse to answer him, Jesus says, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.” This is self-defining: “This is what I think, this is what I feel, this is what I will do, this is what I will not do.” “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

So if self-emptying means letting go of the demand that reality be different than it is, how does this self-emptying happen? Well, in my experience, slowly. This is what discipleship, growing in grace, sanctification (to use the language of our tradition) are all about, emptying ourselves of our standard egocentric demands for security, for appreciation, and for control. And *one way* this emptying happens is through the spiritual practice of prayer.

The Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, once said, “God does not fit into an occupied heart.” My teacher Henri Nouwen, playing off this insight, used to ask us, “What are you pre-occupied with?” He would invite us to consider this question because Henri knew so well in himself the default position of self-concern, self-centeredness, the narrow mind with which we routinely meet the world. Like a game of musical chairs in which all the chairs are already taken, in the narrow mind there is no room for the spacious mind of God because of our discursive thinking, the chatter in our heads.

Imagine if we were wired up with speakers attached to our skulls, and all day long we broadcast every thought going through our heads. We’d drive each other crazy! Even our familiar discursive, “talking” prayers, “give me this, help me with that,” offered without the spirit of loving attention and spacious mind, may just amount to a lot of

noise. Another contemporary of John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, said that she had no talent for discursive, talking prayer, but she taught a prayer of listening, remaining quietly and lovingly in Christ's presence. Instead of talking, Teresa imagined Jesus kindly present in her heart. Both Theresa and John offered considerable instruction in non-discursive, listening prayer, emptying ourselves so we can be filled with God and come into the spacious mind of Christ.

Instruction in many forms of this listening prayer is locally available. There are Centering Prayer groups all over Nashville—you can find them by Googling Contemplative Outreach in Middle Tennessee. There are wonderful Centering Prayer retreats offered at St. Mary's Sewanee throughout the year. Downstairs in All Faith Chapel on Wednesday afternoons from 5:15-6:15 my wife Kathy and I lead an Insight Meditation Group, which cultivates this emptying and loving presence using Buddhist meditation methods. A Buddhist book that I find hugely helpful is Dennis Genpo Merzel's *Big Mind, Big Heart*.

Several weekends ago Kathy and I were at St. Mary's Sewanee for a retreat with Rabbi Rami Shapiro, a remarkable Jewish teacher, Rabbi Rami is very interested in the self-emptying that the Jewish teacher Jesus, among others, taught. Rami said that for himself, the method he has found most helpful is the Hindu practice of *nama-japa*, Sanskrit for the repetition of a Name of God. (*The Sacred Art of Lovingkindness*, 113-114).

Every religion has its version of nama-japa. In Hebrew it's called gerushin. The practice is simple: find a Name of God or some other short phrase that speaks to you of the spacious mind, and continuously repeat it on the out-breath all day long. Of course

you will forget periodically during the day, and when you notice you have forgotten, simply start up again. Perhaps the most famous Christian example is the Eastern Orthodox practice of the Jesus prayer, repeated in time with the breath: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, [in-breath] have mercy on me [out-breath].” Common Christian mantras are Jesus, Mary, kindness, mercy, peace, or a short phrase. I like the Hebrew word *Chokmah*, or the Greek *Sophia* the name for Holy Wisdom, the feminine aspect of the Godhead. The repetition of the Name of God is a way to empty the narrow mind of discursive self-referencing. You can begin with those in-between times, waiting in line, stopped at a traffic light, sitting in a waiting room, or noticing when you’ve gotten hooked by the narrow mind. I like to do it while riding my bike. Mechanically repeating the Name or word isn’t the point—it’s using the practice to open to loving awareness. “Practicing the presence of God,” Brother Lawrence put it. Practicing loving-kindness.

St. Francis of Assisi, whose prayer we use to close this service each week, would spend whole nights repeating the same prayer over and over: “Who are you, O God? And who am I?” I don’t think Francis was looking for an answer like “This is who I am and this is who you are” as much as using this prayer to move from the narrow, self-centered mind to the spacious mind of Christ. The narrow mind has no patience—it is full of complaints. The spacious mind has no complaint whatsoever—it allows things to be as they are. Believe it or not, this big, spacious mind is a human possibility. With practice, it is a possibility for you.

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

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