

Body and Mind (Part 2)

We're returning this morning to two pivotal verses in Paul's letter to the Romans. At the beginning of the book, in chapter 1, verse 16, Paul laid out the theme of his letter. He wrote,

"I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. "
(Romans 1:16 NRSV)

And for the first 11 chapters Paul has built on these words, explaining how the message about Jesus is good news for everyone who has faith in Jesus.

Then, as is often the case in his letters, Paul takes a more practical turn as his letter draws near to its close. In chapters 12-16, he will touch on a variety of topics, but they all will have something to do with living this new life in Christ in our everyday world. He began in verse 1 of chapter 12, by talking about our bodies -- appealing to us to offer our bodies to God as our grateful response to all he has done for us in Christ. Today, in verse 2, the focus is our minds.

I made the point last week that we have a tendency to underestimate how important our bodies are to being human and Christian. This de-valuing of our bodies begins with the fact that Christians over the centuries have often seen our bodies as the source of our problems. But back in the beginning of Romans when Paul explains what went wrong with humanity, he begins with the mind. He writes in chapter 1, "For though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and

their senseless minds were darkened." (Romans 1:19-21 NRSV) So, according to Scripture—or Paul, at least—our thinking, more than our bodies, is the heart of the problem.

Both Scripture and human experience teach that our minds are affected by sin. We know too well how our thinking can be led astray by our prejudices and biases—both personal ones and the ones we've learned from the society around us. As Rogers and Hammerstein put in the musical, *South Pacific*,

You've got to be taught
to hate and fear,
you've got to be taught
from year to year.
It's got to be drummed
in your dear little ear.
You've got to be carefully taught...

You've got to be taught before it's too late,
before you are six or seven or eight,
to hate all the people your relatives hate,
you've got to be carefully taught!

We know that the world around us pressures us to conform to its ways of thinking. And we know that in extreme cases those forces can lead us to deny facts and evidence, to act contrary to reason and common sense, and even to twist the teaching of Scripture.

Throughout history, Christians have expressed a lot of ambivalence about the life of the mind. On the one hand, we owe a tremendous debt to great Christian thinkers through the ages. But on the other hand, there have always been Christians who have rejected intellectual pursuits, who have taught that theology and scholarship are impediments to Christian faith. And we have had

the same ambivalence toward intellectual movements coming from outside the church, from the Greek and Roman philosophers of Paul's time to modern science, to the postmodern thinkers of today.

So what is a thinking Christian to do? It's enough to drive a person to follow Paul's lead at the end of Romans 7 when he cried out, "Wretched man that I am!" Is there any way out of this mess?

The good news is found in the center of verse 2. Paul urges us, rather than to let the world to press us into its ways of thinking, to "be transformed by the renewing of [our] minds."

The key word in this is "renewed." Paul's choice of words has a couple of important implications. The first is simply that our minds are not a lost cause—they are worthy of being renewed. Our minds are part of God's good creation. And so all of our intellectual abilities—reasoning and logic and memory and creating and questioning—are good things! The second implication is that it is possible for our minds to be renewed. In Christ we have been set free, through the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, to use all our intellectual capacities to love the Lord our God.

Paul doesn't, however, give us a program or formula or curriculum for doing this. But it only seems reasonable that being intentional about our way of thinking must have a lot to do with it. Without suggesting that everyone needs to become a theologian or a scholar, I would like to suggest that the renewing

of our minds does involve a certain amount of intentional work that brings together four pieces.

The first piece is Scripture. If we are to be people who can approach the world with the mind of Christ, one thing we need, but which many Christians in today's world lack, is basic biblical literacy. Peggy Wallace and I were talking a couple of weeks ago about her grandson who is in the process to be ordained as a Presbyterian minister. One of the first hurdles our candidates have to face is something called the Bible Content Examination. It's the first in a battery of tests all our candidates must pass. The exam was created about a generation ago, because our denomination began to notice that even many of our prospective pastors don't know the Bible very well.

But how can we begin to think like Christians unless we know the message? And the baseline for that is knowing Scripture and living with Scripture from day to day. A basic beginning point is this—every Christian who can, should read the entire Bible through from cover to cover at least once in his or her lifetime, and preferably more than once. And then to read it in some way a on regular, everyday, basis.

The second piece is a growing knowledge of the world around us. That covers an extremely broad territory ranging from the arts to the sciences, and from history to current events. Being a reader is an important part of that, too, maybe the most important part, but in today's world we have access to a lot of good, scholarly, well-researched knowledge through our TVs—I'm thinking of

sources like the History Channel and PBS and the National Geographic Channel, and I'm sure there are many others.

The third piece is developing our critical thinking skills. I could say a lot more about this if time permitted, but one thing that is absolutely critical is being able to distinguish between facts and assumptions, the difference between statements that can be supported by facts or evidence or reasons, and those that can't. And that includes an awareness of our own assumptions—to constantly ask ourselves if the things we believe about ourselves or others or the world around us can be supported with facts and evidence and reasons. We need to be able identify our own prejudices and preferences and to have the humility to let them be exposed.

And fourth—and finally—the renewal of our minds happens in community. We need the community of Christians to help us explore the breadth and depth of what God has revealed, and we need the diversity of the body of Christ to help call us to recognize our biases. But we also need a wider community of learning to help us explore the full arena of truth and knowledge, and to challenge the blind spots that other Christians may not be able to help us see.

Paul says that as we are transformed by the renewing of our minds, we will be able to discern “what is the will of God -- what is good and acceptable and perfect.” This isn't to deny that discerning God's will is a spiritual process, involving prayer and meditation, or that God's wisdom may sometimes seem like foolishness in the eyes of the world. But Paul also tells us that that our minds,

formed by Scripture and God's revelation in Christ – our minds open to truth from all the sources that God has given us to seek it – our minds are to be involved in discerning how to live faithfully in the world.

I'd like to end with a story. It isn't a specifically Christian story, but it illustrates the difference that how we think about a problem can make. Several weeks ago I mentioned a book I had just picked up, written by a man named Mauricio Miller. He has devoted his life to trying to figure out how people successfully rise out of poverty. His innovative work has been recognized by Mr. Miller being awarded a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant."

He was already a nationally recognized leader in the social services field when he began to struggle with why the programs he led in Oakland, CA didn't seem to be all that successful in actually lifting people out of poverty. So he began over, by setting aside all his assumptions, and went back to his own experience of moving from poverty to the middle class.

He identified the crucial role that his mother, Berta, played in it. He says that when people look at women like his mother they too often see someone who is caught in the trap of her own poor choices, or someone who is a victim of the system—but in any case someone who deserves judgment or who needs to be rescued. But Berta was hard-working—she worked as hard as many a Silicon Valley entrepreneur—and she was just as creative and resilient. She worked multiple jobs, many of them "off the books," she believed in her

children, and sacrificed greatly for her them. She insisted that her son go to college—he eventually graduated from the University of California at Berkley.

From his Berkeley experience he learned the importance of social networks. His Berkeley classmates—who were mostly from middle and upper class homes—got a leg up on their careers from connections in their families, or from connections gained in the unpaid internships they could afford to do. But he recognized that low income families also have strong social networks—in fact most wouldn't survive without them.

He recognized that when we look at the upper levels of society we see people's assets, when we look at the poor we only see liabilities. And anti-poverty programs tend to start by looking of the poor as people who need “experts”—usually paid professionals-- to fix their lives. But the organization Mauricio Miller now leads, the Family Independence Initiative (FII), starts by viewing the poor as people who are experts on their own lives, and who have the abilities and skills to improve their own lives. FII emphasizes the strength of the relational ties of families and communities. And they actually provide very little in the way of what we think of as social services. They help a group of families come together, usually recruited by one family in a community. They meet to set some common goals they want to pursue for their own families—maybe better jobs, or better health, or their kids succeeding in school, or owning their own homes. And then they let those families groups decide how to pursue their goals.

FII's role is to provide little nudges and incentives for folks to use the talents and power they already possess. One unique thing they do is to set up a reporting system—which they pay families for doing—that lets them track their efforts and their results. FII sets up incentives to encourage the families to do what they want to do—things like matching funds or partial scholarships. But it's up to them to figure out how to reach their goals, to identify or create the resources they need. In fact, FII actually has fired staff people for doing things for their clients. They've had some remarkable successes. Year-to-year gains in family income in the double digits are common, children's grades improve, many go to college, new businesses are being formed, neighborhoods are being transformed.

The work our missionaries in Africa, the Garbat-Welches are doing, is built on similar principles and a foundation of Christian faith. Both depend on transformed ways of thinking—in their case recognizing that the people they partner with have been created in the image of God and have the God-given abilities to transform their lives and communities.

Our minds matter. The church and the world need Christians who are set free from conforming to the thought patterns—the assumptions and ways of reasoning-- of the world. The world needs Christians who are steeped in Scripture, who think deeply about their faith, who are actively engaged in seeking God's truth wherever it can be found, who are critical thinkers aware of the unfounded assumptions of others as well as their own, who seek out

communities of those who are on the same quest to discern the good,
acceptable, and perfect will of God—and then to do it in their lives.

What is your next step? Amen.

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