

Congregational Church of the Messiah

Third Sunday after Christmas

January 11, 2009

What's on Your Mind?

I Corinthians 2:11-16

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Things of the world are physical, empirical, limited in time and space. On the other hand, spiritual things of God are not physical, limited in time or space, and yet we have been given the capacity to relate to both through the amazing gift of the spirit within us.

Through Christ, who brings together human and divine in a unique and perfect way, the spirit of God within us is able to understand spiritual things. We can be one with the Spirit of God and together with one another in God's Spirit.

We are one in the Spirit when we are one in the Lord. Paul was writing to young believers in Corinth who struggled with understanding the spirit of God lived out by Christ and which Paul also sought to follow once his mind had been redirected by meeting Christ. At that point, everything changed for Paul so completely that he could say he had the "mind of Christ" in him and everyone else who completely believed in Christ would also have that same spirit of Christ.

When we are one in the spirit we feel with another person, we understand where another person is coming from, we can empathize with that person. On a basketball team you practice, talk, practice, learn, and practice until the players know and feel what the other players will do. Everyone can see when a whole team is working smoothly together and knows it is more than just running certain patterns.

The same is true where people work together on a worthy project so much that they automatically anticipate what the others will do and assist each other in accomplishing the task.

Yesterday Jesse, Jimmy Blue, and I spent just a few minutes removing all the ornaments, boxing the tree, carrying and lifting all the things up the steep pull-down stairs and back to the storage place in the attic. The work was light, fun and fast by working together with a good spirit.

However, without a spirit of understanding, we cannot be expected to know, feel, or comprehend how another person is thinking.

That is the distinction that Paul is making among the early believers in Corinth. If you have been in the Presence of God you have an spiritual experience that is uniquely yours, but one which thousands of other individuals also have had at special times and places.

It's like being at the 1984 Olympics. If you were there at the opening or closing celebrations, then you share an amazing experience with thousands of others. Each would

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express it in somewhat different ways but all would understand what you experienced better than someone who had never been to an Olympics or paid any attention to them.

So Paul is saying persons who have never had a spiritual experience in their lives cannot be expected to understand what a person is saying when the person is talking about God's spirit in his or her life. It simply will not make sense because it is not part of the other person's experience.

My younger sister, Betsey, spent several years teaching school on the Alaskan Island of Sitka, close to Juneau, the capital of Alaska. It is a small island with one main street through town and less than one mile of paved road on the island. It has a good harbor and fishing. She taught a combined class of second and third graders, most of whom had not been off the island. To her amazement, they did not know what a railroad was. They had never seen or heard of one.

That was a simple physical reality. How much more difficult it is to understand a spiritual reality when we cannot see or touch or listen to it! We are brought up in our society to expect things to be proven by physical demonstration and so it was in Jesus' day.

"Show us a sign," the religious leaders asked of Jesus, "then we will believe." Jesus pointed out that they say they want a sign but they already had a sign, the sign of God's revelation in Jonah and now a sign better than Jonah had appeared and they did not even recognize Him (even Christ Himself, a full revelation of God)... (from Matthew 12:38ff)

There is a significant distinction between someone who has received the Spirit of God and someone who has not. The person, who has not will be unable to understand why the person with God's Spirit speaks, lives and functions in a certain way.

Van Gogh was considered a religious fanatic during the stage in his early life when he was living his total commitment to God's Call, as he understood it. To Van Gogh, the total commitment meant giving away everything, living the life of an ascetic in order to experience the life of suffering with the poor. That is what He understood God expected of him.

Many people in Van Gogh's day, and even historically looking back at his life years later, did not understand or accept his social actions. They applied a very natural, common, practical, worldly view that ridiculed his expression of his faith and labeled him a "religious fanatic."

In Paul's message, he clearly states that we are all human beings but until we are conscious of God's Holy Spirit within us, we cannot understand spiritual things because we are using the power of our finite thinking. We need the infinite power of God's assistance to understand spiritual things.

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One definition of the word “repentance” means to change one’s mind from something done wrong to something that is right. That is how we grow in our faith. With God’s help, we change our minds.

In this first letter to the Corinthians, Paul was not using the word “mind” to mean our physical brain, a part of our anatomy. Rather I believe he meant our attitudes, our approach to information and especially our approach to thinking about spiritual matters of the soul relating to God. Is the world so different today than in Paul’s day?

If we are to understand God, we must open our minds from believing only what we can see and touch, only what the world around us shows us. We must relate to the spiritual part of our creation—the gift of spirit that God has given each of us.

One summer, legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden came to the summer basketball camp that our son was attending in Northridge. Wooden’s focus was on the mental and spiritual game—not on the physical plays or ability to shoot the ball. He knew the deep value of the mind and spirit being focused, disciplined, alert, and concentrated on that goal. The physical body was simply the vehicle to achieve a goal determined by the mind and spirit of the athlete.

With the Spirit of God within us, we are capable of understanding, at least in part, the marvelous things of God. We are still finite creatures and God is infinite, but through our spirit, we can relate to His Spirit. We can understand in part just as we can see His purposes in part. Through our spirit, we can even communicate with our Creator who already is part of us.

God is an ever-present reality, Whose purpose is to help us mature and grow from where we are today in our relationship with Him to a deeper, more complete harmony.

We can trust this relationship because of the very nature of God foretold by the prophets. Paul quotes Isaiah’s words when he says, “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man has conceived the good things which God has prepared for those who love Him”
(I Corinthians 2:9)

We can trust God’s Spiritual leading and follow Him. Our Church is one body of Christians through which God can change part of the world. Our Future Planning Committee continues to seek to discern how God would lead the Church of the Messiah through the coming year and beyond. We seek to know the will of God for us. Knowing with God’s guidance and support, He will help us find the way to accomplish His will on earth here in Westchester. Great is God’s faithfulness to those who seek to follow Him.

Perhaps you remember the story of a famous plastic surgeon told by a pastor in Dallas, Texas. The story is about a woman who came to see him one day.

She explained: “It’s about my husband. He has been injured in a fire. He tried to save his parents from a burning house but he couldn’t get to them in time. They were both

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killed. His face was burned and disfigured, and he has given up on life. He has gone into hiding and will not let anyone see him, not even me. He has shut me and everyone else out completely.”

“Don’t worry,” the skilled doctor responded, “I am sure I can fix him.” With the great advances we’ve made in plastic surgery in recent years, I am sure I can restore his face.”

“But that’s just it,” said the woman. “He won’t let anyone help him. He thinks God did this to punish him because he didn’t save his parents.”

Then came her shocking words, “I want you to disfigure my face so I can be like him! If I can share in his pain, maybe then he will let me back into his life. I love him so much. I want to be with him. And if that’s what it takes, that’s what I want you to do.”

Of course, the plastic surgeon would not agree. But moved deeply by the wife’s determined and total love, with the wife’s permission, he went to the man’s room and knocked, but there was not answer.

He then said loudly through the door, “I know you are in there and I know you can hear me. I am a plastic surgeon, and I want you to know that I can restore your face.”

No response. The doctor pleaded, “Please come out and let me help you.” Still no response.

Then, still speaking through the door, the doctor told the man what his wife was asking him to do.

“She wants me to disfigure her face. She wants me to make her face like yours in the hope that then you will let her back into your life. That’s how much she loves you. That’s how much she wants to help you!”

There was a brief moment of silence. Then, ever so slowly, the doorknob began to turn...and the disfigured man came out to make a new beginning and to find a new life.

By her love he was set free, brought out of hiding, and given a new start.”¹

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him would not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16)

May you know the spirit of God in your mind, your heart and your soul welling up to the fullness of life God has waiting for you with Christ our Lord.

Amen.

¹ Dunnam, Maxie. *Loving the Jesus Way*. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1995, page 17-18.