

ISAIAH 58:1-12

PSALM 112:1-10

I CORINTHIANS 2:1-16

MATTHEW 5:13-20

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany; Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 5, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Christ Minding!

Paul declares for one and all to hear, at least so he once said to the church at Corinth, “. . . We have the mind of Christ!” The immediate question that comes to mind is, “Do we really now!” Now I do not know about you, but rarely during the course of my day, going about my business, do I stop and say to myself, “Self, you so much have the mind of Christ today! Yes, me and Jesus are in lockstep in every way imaginable! To quote a horrific bumper sticker complete with a heart, just in time for Valentine’s Day, “Me and Jesus, going steady!” Gross! “Why Tim, people would have to do a doubletake of you today, mistaking you for the rabbi from Nazareth! Who could tell the difference!” The whole idea seems preposterous, like such an audacious, even arrogant, proposition! I could never presume to proclaim for myself as much! And as they say on ESPN’s Monday Night Football, “C’mon man!” Let’s get real! Seriously! The mind of Christ? And yet, based on other readings from the Bible, we know to some degree that it is true that indeed we have the mind of Christ because we are created in the very image of God! We know what Jesus was up to and what he would have us do! On that, we are certain!

Today we explore the apostle Paul’s mysterious, mystical, spiritual, side, a softer side even, man of mystery and intrigue! So much of

Paul's letters come across as cold and calculating, nuts and bolts, heavily relying on the law that he had once shown uncompromised loyalty, absolute fealty, yes, sworn to uphold and protect. It was a reversal of a posture that, upon his suddenly dramatic conversion, he quickly abandoned for grace, trading in his prior allegiance for a big dose of justice and righteousness. It is hard to believe that Paul had willfully watched the death of many faithful followers of Jesus. Quite a turnaround! Much of the apostle's letters are filled with a laundry list of dos and don'ts, warnings against every carnal sin imaginable, Paul obviously fixated on sex, the proverbial sins of the flesh, the former Pharisee driven by his own personal tormenting thorn in the flesh, a constant companion saturating his writings, revealing Paul to be quite the obsessive micromanager. No doubt this chronic and terminal trauma expressed itself in numerous ways, an emotional, mental, psychological, hangover, haunting him and influencing his every move. I'm just saying! Paul, a detail man, seems to function like a theological triage unit nurse, operating much like an ecclesial version of an Emergency Room coordinator, his verbal skills, the precision in his cutting words, precise literary incisions carved like the most gifted neurosurgeon, his carefully crafted points clearly on display.

Based on his letters, it appears as if Paul spent much of his writing opportunities addressing challenges and conflicts, yes, certainly time well spent. The erstwhile prophetic apostle meticulously addressing problems being faced by each local church within his charge, epistles bearing the name of specific local congregations. You know them well, Rome, Galatia, Corinth, Ephesus, etc. Today's almost ironic Pauline images conjure up prose from the Hebrew Bible in the wisdom literature, echoing linguistic gems from the Book of Proverbs. Paul waxes eloquent about the wisdom of God in Christ compared to the proverbial wisdom of the world, the multicultural wisdom he discovered in his travels, an influence that was obviously at one time most displeasing but somehow compelling, fascinating to Paul, drawing

his attention like a moth to light, mesmerizing this most appreciative and articulately and intellectually trained Pharisee. After all, Paul was a learned man who had once been emersed, deeply engrained, steeped, in that rich but controversially oppressive and exclusive tradition. Based on Paul's many narrow views, at least based on the way we tend to interpret them, as the apostle continued to fall back into his Pharisaic, law-driven past, his words today in our lection from I Corinthians seem counter intuitive, contrary to Paul's now overarching views as a follower of Christ who never knew Jesus!

Frankly, so many of Paul's concerns, his overriding argument, at least according to the way we read many of his writings, sound ominous, with warnings of judgment and God's displeasure, very much like clergy and laity in more strict congregational environments. Ironically, Corinthian Paul sounds a lot like the expressive prophecies of the last few decades, threatening ideas to those who have feared the boogiemer known as the new age movement, the societal, global, threat of secular humanism, oh what a redundant phrase. Paul comes across like a proponent of those hiding behind every 90s bush ready to peddle some dangerous wares, selling a toxic liberal bill of goods. These sumptuous temptations looked innocent enough, hiding in pretty, shiny, beads and crystals and other tempting jewels all designed to mesmerize the unsuspecting. And do not forget the intoxicating, hypnotic, music masquerading as traditional tunes! Oh, the dangers! Beware! Warning Will Robinson! Warning! No doubt Paul would have been very displeased, totally threatened, by the postmodern winds that have been blowing at hurricane speed for decades now, moving with equal societal persuasive force, the Church and the churches either delightfully or dreadfully caught in the vortex of this iconic contemporary movement. For many of us, longing to break free from the shackles of our narrow ecclesiological and theological parameters, these seismic shifts seem more like a gentle breeze carrying us on eagle's wings to new heights of discovery, a welcome change from the

dead-end narratives that once stifled and stunted any chance the voice the still speaking Spirit of God might have had in being able to convey, any chance it could rise above the chatter of a host of mixed messages, then, in Paul's context, and now, in ours, delivering a most prudent and pertinent, a most relevant message. **Believe it or not, however, this is not a sermon designed to throw the self-appointed apostle Paul under the bus because I always must acknowledge my issues with the former Pharisee. I tend to pick at Paul! A lot! But my homiletical offering this morning is designed to complement Paul's literary efforts, to applaud the liberating words he once wrote to the pluralistically diverse Corinthian congregation that he no doubt had established. His words, now firmly understood to be holy writ, are also a reminder to ourselves that his emerging and evolving thoughts, like all the ancient writers of the biblical narrative, must not be held captive, frozen in time, imprisoned by their own wordsmithing, but must be allowed, more than enabled, to breathe, to speak a new and relevant word that, yes, that not only enables, but emboldens and empowers our belief and faith, even our doubts that now thankfully fuel new avenues of God discovery, yes, even to the slightest degree fulfilling our spiritual desires, the yearnings of our hearts and minds. These timeless scriptures must be released from the bondage upon which many have historically and continue to insist, yes, even including Paul's oft stodgy linguistic prisons that he seemed by intent to willingly build.** For when these sacred narratives are unfortunately galvanized, marked in time as static words on a page, they can rarely if ever speak again, never offer a new and exciting revelation. Let's get Pauline, shall we?

Perhaps the ultimate irony in what must have been an epic compositional struggle as Paul crafted his Corinthian musings, as the apostle pontificated his routinely, highly opinionated remarks, is that he seems to create and cultivate a contradictory position than is the substance of other Pauline writings, his beautifully mystical words

wafting lighter than air. Of course, Paul still needed to heavily weigh upon them way too many qualifiers, fearful of risking too much freedom of expression and interpretation. To trust in the Spirit for a new word is always risky business and despite Paul's sudden freelancing style, the apostle seems to want to tap the brakes, put in some boundaries, clarifying with some perceived necessary guardrails, assuring the flock that hard parameters of certitude remained in place, corralling anyone's creatively free-thinking possibilities or misinterpretation of his points. Paul reminds me of my conservative upbringing as I unwittingly sought to break free from the bondage of traditional and institutional fundamentalism, with what became prohibitively orthodox thinking. Everything was fine as long as any conclusions reached, any potential discoveries made, aligned with historic doctrinal creeds. No coloring outside the lines, no thinking outside of boxes! Every idea had to come full circle, boomeranging to the point that they merely parroted, reaffirmed, what we had always heard and dutifully quoted since our earliest churchly memories. The arguments were nonsequitur. As long as we did not veer off course, stray from the narrowest truth, all was well and your thoughts and utterances were welcome, okay in every way. The second anyone dared to suggest a thought that was new, alternative, contrary, or different, or even worse, was perhaps perceived as radical, challenging the spiritual status quo, the potential heretic was subject to immediate ridicule and scorn, contempt, and public correction, a definite need for contrition and further indoctrination, the offending party expected to do some introspection some version of conservative sensitivity training. If the Bible did not explicitly declare it with crystal clarity, then any implicit idea, any sudden aha moment, any intuitive impulse, was deemed inappropriately way out of bounds. Debate and dialogue were fine as long as the discussion found its way back to something or some things that had already been affirmed as tried and true and always truth. The questions and the answers were always in lockstep, never different from what they had always been. In his vain attempt to keep

the flock in line, lemmings who drank the Kool Aid verbatim without nary an alternative narrative, Paul had quickly fallen into this trap, a deep rut, sadly changing his Judaic Pharisaical spots for those of the Christian variety, trading one form of “orthodox” inflexibility for another, fostering a “my way or the highway” approach that Paul sincerely, giving him some benefit of the doubt, thought necessary to keep the faithful in line and on the straight and narrow. These were young churches and thus it was important to keep the herd herding in one direction. Think about it, we did not yet have creeds with all their doctrinal requirements!

Today we read a kinder and gentler version of Pauline words, still needing, however, to wrestle them, free them, from the writer’s vice grip. Despite Paul’s narrowest intent, we discover some language that offers to us a pathway, or pathways, to a faithfully spiritual belief that indeed transcends any timebound language, that moves us beyond any words on a page. I am not even sure of how much or if Paul realized how much he had been influenced by local culture, but it comes through in words like these. You know what they say? When in Rome. . . And after all, it was Paul who dared suggest to his congregational constituency to be all things to all people! Was it by accident or intent? Paul writes, “We talk about God’s wisdom which has been hidden as a secret. God determined this wisdom in advance, before time began, for our glory.” Sure, sounds a bit “new-agey” to me! I mean, how postmodern can you get? The apostle affirms to the Corinthian and thus to a very Hellenistic congregation that “God has prepared things for those who love God that no eye has seen, or ear has heard, or that has not crossed the mind of any human being.” The irony in Paul’s words is that they seem to affirm and embrace the very gnosis, the rampant Gnosticism, a wildfire that quickly spread throughout early Christendom and was so feared by the early Church, becoming one of its earliest heresies despite the good aspects inherent in this way of first century postmodern thinking. Yes, Paul, I

agree, there are some things that demand the subtle nuance of divinely human intuition, that only become available, realized and acknowledged, through the mysterious presence of a transcendent, awe and wonder inspiring and inspiriting, God. I am glad Paul discovered that missing link at Corinth! It is the very Spirit of the Holy that bridges the gap between the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal, the human and the Divine. Only through the Spirit do we even begin to discern that there is a great I AM as Moses once discovered on an epic mountain hike, encountering in a new way, for the first time, a holy other, a great Spirit of the universe, the ground of all being, yes, a mysterious numinous, the very Spirit of a God who is still speaking even as God spoke to Paul and his ilk and continues to serendipitously speak to us now. And yes, we are as limited now even as we are amazed as was our first century forebears in the faith. Still speaking is far more than lip service!

Paul adds, “God has revealed these things to us through the Spirit. The Spirit searches everything, including the depths of God!” Just imagine. These words could have been taken out of a progressive’s playbook, a contemporary how-to handbook, as current as are you and me! Paul goes on to say, “Who knows a person’s depths except their own spirit that lives in them? In the same way, no one has known the depths of God except God’s Spirit. We have not received the world’s spirit but God’s Spirit so that we can know the things given to us by God. These are the things we are talking about—not with words taught by human wisdom but with words taught by the Spirit—we are interpreting spiritual things to spiritual people. . .” Who is this man? Who is this man of mystery and intrigue? Who is this Paul, this apostle? He seems so modern, so postmodern, so way ahead of his time! He seems to have been abducted and replaced by an AI ibot, an imposter! He sounds like a 60s guru, a shaman perhaps! He sounds like a forerunner to Deepak Chopra! Goodness gracious! Years ago, if I had quoted these mystery laden biblical words back in

my restrictively, stifling and suffocating, conservative environs, and had not cited them as Pauline, quoting from book, chapter, and verse, there would have been a doubtful outcry. My hunch is that these sticklers would not have known the source of this mysterious language, a vernacular brimming with transcendent awe and wonder. My would-be mentors from back in the day would have been appalled, swearing that these sayings were spun from a demonic source, a conspiracy fomented from a dangerous new age cult, all this nonsensical verbiage the spawn of the devil's handmaid. These words they were hearing as if for the first time were nothing more than linguistic wolves in sheep's clothes, postmodern drivel designed to relativize and trivialize the faith of our forebears, a slap in the face challenging, questioning, the inspired, inerrant, infallible, "Word of God!" One thing Paul truly understood and knew how to do and how to do well, was his gifted ability to relate to the people within his care, to speak their language in making his points. Again, his relational mantra of being all things to all people! Finding commonality with a prospect is an evangelistic trick as old as is the Church itself! If we do not relate, then we are not relevant! And no, that does not mean that everything becomes relative!

Paul's writing on whatever day this was with whatever drove the apostle's mindset was a reminder of a most important, essential, reality. We learn as we read these openly inviting musings that became canonized scripture, the value of multiculturalism as it informs and impacts, as it teaches us to leave the confines of our protective bubble, our tribal, parochial, proprietary, and sectarian caves. We are better when we learn from one another, when we discover the beauty that other cultures and other religious perspectives have to offer us. We also learn as we read these specific Pauline words that on a first or second or third glance, and so forth, that these writings do not appear in the least to be very Pauline! In this composition we see a delightfully broadening view, an expanding mind!

Kudos! And that, my friends, is a good thing! Despite Paul's often hardline approach, his usual tough guy image, yes, his typical my-way-or-the-highway approach, today we read a softer more spiritual side, truly a reminder that the story, Paul's story, his spiritual journey, was far from finished, that Paul was still evolving, right along with the fledgling early Church he was leading like building a plane in the air. Yes, Paul was flying by the seat of his pants, literally writing on the fly in real time. The apostle was still learning, growing, and maturing in the new faith he had only somewhat recently discovered. Paul still had much to learn! Paul was human! And let's give him the benefit of the doubt we should always give any and all these ancient writers regarding texts that became our Christian scriptures. Our knowledge, our gnosis, was simply not on their radar thus never their intent. Paul's letters were epistles written and sent to specific congregations as they were formed and forming, becoming missional outposts birthed because of Paul's evangelistic efforts. We should always read them that way, read them as such! What I love about today's Pauline gleanings is his convergence of his traditional Judaism with the Hellenistic culture framing these new gentile congregations. **In this sacred setting we are reading East meets West thinking, a very beautiful thing indeed! Yes, we are seeing the manifestation of the Day of Pentecost subtly hovering in the wings! Of all Paul's wonderful writings, challenging as some of them are, perhaps no more than in these Corinthian conversations can we see God at work in the rearview mirror revealing the pathways of a people, the still speaking Spirit doing the thing that the Spirit has done and continues to do with anyone sensitive enough to sense, to lean into its subtle breeze. Yes, the more things change, the more they remain the same! So, it was and is for the faithful!**

The goal for each and every one of us and for this local missional congregation called the First Congregational United Church of Christ is to be open to the still speaking Spirit of God, embodying these words

as more than a slogan, a catchphrase, making sure that these images become more than mere chatter amidst the chatter of a cacophony of voices that are vying for attention. Our hope and our prayer are that perhaps texts like this one become a way forward for our life's faithful commitment as they no doubt already have done so for countless millions all the way back to their first reading, as shared among this Hellenistic Corinthian audience. As Paul once noted, "Spiritual people comprehend everything, but they themselves are not understood by anyone!" Yes, supposedly, we have the mind of Christ! It is up to us to share our personal and corporate ministries in ways that reflect that gift, advocating hospitably inclusive perspectives, offering welcoming initiatives, all of which are and ever become radically relevant and relational, passionately appealing, especially among us as a beloved faith community dedicated to building a vibrant and vital missional church! If God is still speaking, and I firmly believe with all my being that God is, and I presume that you do too and that is why you are here, it is up to us to be the voice of the Holy in the world, a message that shakes the foundations of the world and makes a difference for us and everyone with whom we share these eternal blessings!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and bids us to have the mind of Christ! Good luck with that! Amen and amen.

