

Sermon for the 20th Sunday after Pentecost

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I learned something this week I'd like to share with you. Let me start with a story.

I didn't drink coffee until I went to seminary. I was about 30, and I'd often ride my bike to campus. At 7:30 in the morning I'd pass by this coffee shop with the misspelled name — Peets — , where 20 or 30 people were lined up on the sidewalk waiting to get in. At 4:00 in the afternoon I'd ride the other way down the street, and there were 20 or 30 people lined up to get a cup of coffee.

I didn't drink coffee because I tried it and didn't like it. My earlier attempts to learn to drink Folgers and Taster's Choice just didn't get very far. But seeing all these people lined up at Peets made me think I should at least see what the fuss was about.

Now, this may not be the kind of decision making process a moral theologian would use. — "If lots of people do it, I should try it." — But I went in, ordered a cup of Viennese Roast, added a little sugar and milk and took a sip. All at once my nose started running, my sinuses drained, and I so thoroughly seasoned my tastebuds so that nothing else would have flavor for three days. I was hooked. I got back in line, ordered a pound of Viennese Roast, and went home to wash the dust out of the coffee maker.

So I became a coffee drinker. And it didn't effect me at all. I would have my last cup of coffee for the day sitting on the edge of my bed before laying down for the night. No problem. This was true for about nine months.

And then one night at two o'clock I woke up. I should say I snapped awake. And at that hour I could think of about 236 different things at the same time. What I couldn't do was get back to sleep. After about five nights in a row with this sudden waking up, I asked myself if this might have something to do with the coffee?

So I learned that I should never drink coffee later than about 4 in the afternoon. But these past couple of weeks I've been having recurrences of the same thing — waking up at 2AM with a racing mind. It's not coffee. I wondered what it could be? I finally figured it out.

It's Chris Matthews. It's the evening news, and CNN and CSpan and Mad Money and Hardball with Chris Matthews. With everything going on in the news I've been feasting on all these talking heads laboring over the details of the elections, over the Wall Street mess, over the banking collapse. And I finally put together that all these arguing, laboring, doom predicting commentators were triggering such a level of anxiety induced chemicals in

my system that it really was about like drinking coffee just before bed.

I share this rather long story with you because I have learned again that part of our spiritual education is learning to pay attention to the sources of anxiety in our life and keep them in moderation. Life itself gives us enough moments that trigger anxiety. So if we can ignore some of the anxiety triggers that are in our control, we improve almost every aspect of our life's quality. Cutting down on anxiety-triggers improves your mood, gives you a better sense of being able to handle what comes, and increases the optimism from which generosity and graciousness flow. And we might sleep better, too. So, as I learned with coffee I've learned again: No Chris Matthews after four o'clock.

An important belief of our faith is that God will provide. When we bow our heads before a meal we thank God for this incredible gift of life that we have done nothing to create and on which we so completely depend. We may be able to recognize, perhaps even to understand, all the steps and actions that go into having a bowl of soup we're about to eat; but we can control very few of those steps ourselves. At that moment we pause to offer thanks for the fact that this meal is mostly a gift, even if we have prepared it ourselves.

Our place in this life is to be in a kind of partnership where God has entrusted us to do some of the work of keeping the creation going. God provides, but we have to till the soil and plant the seeds. God inspires, but we have to pick up the brush to paint the picture. God gives us a divine nature that resonates with compassion, but we have to extend the hand to lift our neighbor from the dust.

Our place in this life is also to have faith when the partnership seems to break down. We describe this world as fallen, as captive to that brokenness we call sin. This is not a scientific description, or a historical description, but a symbolic description that reminds us that the world is out of step with the will of God and the love of God. This world does not work perfectly well. Hurricanes ruin homes. Thieves, whether they use a crow bar or fraudulent mortgage loans, steal. The world does not work perfectly well, but this must be true: When everything seems to be heading to ruin, faithful people keep the faith.

We who have faith do not see Wall Street as a replica of the kingdom of God. We know there's a difference between the wisdom of those who are the disciples of Jesus and the wisdom of those who are disciples of Allan Greenspan. Wall Street may collapse; the kingdom of God is still at hand. The CEO's of Lehmann and AIG and Washington Mutual may have demonstrated the failings of our human nature; the CEO of the church, Jesus Christ, has never failed to demonstrate the glory to which our human nature aspires. Chris Matthews may have the gifts of intelligence and insight; but even he would admit that those gifts pale in comparison to the gifts of faith, hope and love that are given to us in our relationship to Jesus Christ.

We are told in today's lessons that we have received the mind of Christ. Let's not forget to use it. In a time when our president and our

presidential candidates have used words like crisis, collapse, failure, depression and ruin it is easy to let our thinking get overwhelmed with worry and dismay. However, there is not one word in scripture that invites us to meditate on the problems of the world. What the Bible teaches us is to meditate on the Word of the Lord, to consider the lilies of the field, to pray at all times.

We are blessed by a reading today that is one of the great hymns of the faith. This was probably a hymn the church had written early on, and which Paul quoted back to them in this letter.

Sometimes saying words out loud brings them to life more than reading them in silence or listening as they are read or sung to us. If you're willing I'd like to have you read them out loud with me. We'll read everything but the last sentence. Those who wish to do so read with me:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my 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 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,

who, though he was in the form of God,
 did not regard equality with God
 as something to be exploited,
 but emptied himself,
 taking the form of a slave,
 being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death--
 even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
 and gave him the name
 that is above every name,
 so that at the name of Jesus
 every knee should bend,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
 and every tongue should confess
 that Jesus Christ is Lord,
 to the glory of God the Father.