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Saving Minds

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Saving Minds

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I want to begin my remarks today with this statement: Jesus Christ wants to save your mind. Please let me say it again. Jesus Christ wants to save your mind.

This statement would not sound strange at all if the direct object was soul instead of mind. We expect to hear sermons about how Jesus is saving our soul. But saving your mind sounds strange. At best it sounds like the old TV ads for the United Negro College Fund—you know, a mind is a terrible thing to waste.

But it should not surprise us that God cares about our minds. We know that God created our minds. Even more, Christianity has from its beginning rejected divisions of the human self. We have rejected dualism between the body and spirit. We have rejected the dualism of body and mind. And we have rejected the dualism of mind and spirit. As human beings we are one as God is one.

The problem is that our mind, along with our body and spirit, are in rebellion against God. Our mind is a source of our alienation from God. In fact, I would go so far as to say that it is a much more serious source of our alienation from God than our body or spirit. So, as a part of my remarks today, I want to talk about sins of the mind so that we can understand what it means to say that Jesus is saving our minds.

The first area of sin is coveting. I begin with this one because Luther's catechism names two types of coveting—coveting our neighbor's spouse and coveting our neighbor's property. I contend that coveting is almost exclusively a sin of the mind. We imagine what it might be like to have a boat like our neighbors. We see a beautiful movie star and wonder what it might be like to have her or him as our lover. We walk through the mall sometimes for the sole purpose of window shopping. And what is window shopping other than a socially acceptable way to describe coveting? I would go so far as to say that baseball is not our national pastime, but it is instead coveting. Coveting is a way of life in our culture.

Materialism is still another way to describe coveting. We want more and more stuff, and we keep collecting more of it. We build bigger and bigger houses to store our stuff, and we even need to rent storage facilities to hold all the stuff we can't fit in our houses.

Martin Luther's words from the Large Catechism are instructive here. He writes,

This last commandment, then, is addressed not to those whom the world considers wicked rogues, but precisely to the most upright—to people who wish to be commended as honest and virtuous because they have not offended against the preceding commandments. (405)

Yes, Luther tells us that coveting is our sin—we who are upright, responsible, good citizens. Sins of the mind are great because they protect our virtue in the eyes of the world, but they are still sins. And we stand condemned.

The second sin of the mind I want to discuss is simply mental laziness. Yes, sloth is a sin. But I want to focus on mental sloth. As college educators, we all see this a lot, but I'm also a sinner too. I can be lazy in my thinking as much as anyone. Let me describe two forms of mental sloth.

The first is the rigid refusal to think. This is the refusal to consider other options. It is the inability to imagine possibilities other than what you already know, think, or believe. It is the refusal to investigate, to read, or to wonder.

One clear expression of this is those who refuse to even consider the possibility of evolution. At Wartburg College we have students who tell professors that they cannot possibly study evolution because they are Christians. There is a fear that somehow knowledge will threaten faith. I sometimes tell students that Jesus did tell his disciples to have the faith of little children, but he didn't tell them to have the minds of little children.

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There may be good reasons to question evolution, but they need to be just that—good reasons, not knee-jerk defensiveness. As Christians, it is our responsibility to understand what we question. In the spirit of Christian love, we should be able to understand and clearly explain even an idea that we despise or think is flat-out wrong.

The second form of laziness is a mindless relativism. In many cases, relativism is open to a variety of options and is the opposite of absolutism. But it becomes a form of mental laziness when a person refuses to make up his or her mind. Yes, there are many issues in our world today that are very complicated and that have answers that are so numerous they seem endless. But at some point we have to decide. To live responsibly in the world demands it. At a certain point, I must vote. At a certain point, I must speak my convictions and act on them in humility, knowing that I could be wrong. Still, I must act.

The paradox here is that mental sloth takes two opposing forms—an unwillingness to consider other options and an unwillingness to make a decision. But paradox should not surprise us as Christians because as Christians we seek to know and understand many paradoxes of faith. We believe in a God who is three yet one. Our savior Jesus Christ is incomprehensibly both fully God and fully man. As a college, we embrace many dialectical relationships in our mission documents, including nurture and challenge, leadership and service, Midwest yet global. And we also speak of the paradoxical complexity and necessity of relating faith and learning. In the spirit of Martin Luther himself, we do not shy away from knowing everything that can be known or even asking questions that seem threatening to faith or downright sacrilegious.

The bottom line of all sins of the mind is that they come back to fear. Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon—above whose tombs I preach—realized that fear, not knowledge, is the enemy of faith. We fear that what we have may not be good enough, so we covet something or someone else. We fear that certain types of knowledge may threaten our faith or our worldview, so we close off our minds to new and different ideas. We fear that making a decision may anger someone or some group, or it may challenge our faith in an all-loving God, so we stop thinking.

In the short gospel lesson just read from Matthew, Jesus said to his disciples, “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

In the midst of the civil rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a sermon on this brief text. It was entitled “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart.” We have first-year students at Wartburg read this sermon every year, and I want to read a short excerpt to you today. King asks,

Who doubts that toughness of mind is one of man’s greatest needs? Rarely do we find men who willingly engage in hard, solid thinking. There is almost a universal quest for easy answers and half-baked solutions. Nothing pains some people more than having to think...We do not have to look far to detect the danger of soft mindedness. Dictators, capitalizing on soft mindedness, have led men to acts of barbarity and terror that are unthinkable in civilized society... There is little hope for us until we become tough minded enough to break loose from the shackles of prejudice, half truth, and down-right ignorance. The shape of the world today does not permit us the luxury of soft mindedness. A nation or a civilization that continues to produce soft minded men purchases its own spiritual death on an installment plan. (233)

King’s words apply to us today. The sins of our minds make us guilty before God and they alienate us from our neighbor, causing and facilitating injustice in the world. We sometimes confess that we have sinned in thought as well as deed. We have sinned because we have not thought rightly and we have sinned because we have not thought at all. And our world is suffering for it.

But Jesus Christ wants to save your mind. And Jesus Christ *is* saving your mind. Paul tells us in Romans 6 that in baptism Christians have been united in Christ’s life, death and resurrection. And it is by the power of baptism that God is overcoming fear with faith and destroying mental sloth with mental activity. Later in Romans, Paul describes the renewal of the mind—the transformation that is being made possible “so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (12:2). Through Jesus Christ, God is making available to us the possibility of wisdom.

Solomon realized the great importance of wisdom in his own calling. He knew that as king of Israel, the most important thing he needed for a good job was wisdom. He could have asked for power, riches, or the death of his enemies. But instead he asked for wisdom so that he could do his work with justice and fairness. It is a gift that all people need in their vocational responsibilities.

You see, it is one thing to have knowledge and another to know what to do with it. You can learn all there is to know about genetics, car repair, English literature or farming, but that still does not mean that you know what you should do with that knowledge—or even what you should do with your life in general. It is a particular problem in our society that we confuse technique and technical knowledge with wisdom. Wisdom is the moral and faithful sense of what to do with our knowledge. It allows us to distinguish being a good chemist at Auschwitz from being a good chemist for a maker of life-saving drugs. It

allows us to farm not simply for the greatest productivity but also for the greatest care of the land. It allows us to use our skill in accounting to provide accurate reports of income, assets and expenses as opposed to clever tricks with the numbers like accountants at Enron. The grace of God, expressed in wisdom, is what allows us to use our knowledge and expertise in the service of others and not for our exclusive, personal gain.

Wisdom is not easy. It cannot be written down in a notebook, filed away in a drawer, entered in a PDA, or memorized for a test. Wisdom occurs when faith puts knowledge into action. It demands a questioning that is critical and rigorous; and it calls for an attentiveness to the world and all its complexity. Knowledge changes and becomes obsolete, but wisdom endures.

Life is not easy for the wise. Wise people recognize all the complexity and all the ambiguity in the world. They see the suffering, the beneficial and the selfish uses of power and knowledge, the irony of life, and the tragedy. Faith is active. It is active in love and when joined with knowledge it becomes wisdom. For Christians then, knowledge will never be a simple matter of technique. It will always require a question of intent or purpose. To be a Christian is to use your mind. To be a Christian, saved by grace, is to think and be wise.

But the life of wisdom is not all terror or duty. There is joy as well because those who are truly wise have hope. Ultimately, wisdom is not possible without hope. By hope I do not mean a shallow optimism that asserts everything will get better, will make sense, or will be easy. There are plenty of preachers, hucksters, and books out there who are preaching a false gospel of positive think-

ing and a “don’t worry, be happy” theology. Optimism is for the foolish—not the wise. Optimism seeks an easy way out because it does not care to see complexity and ambiguity. When Jesus preached, some people came to him with optimism. These were the ones he rebuked for clinging to Abraham, Moses and the law. Others, however, came in expectation, looking for the Kingdom of God, and they found hope. They were engaged in the world and sought to understand their responsibilities to their neighbors. They came in repentance. Hope empowers such wisdom. It is what enables us to stare into the abyss of ambiguity, doubt, fear, and complexity and then to walk in with our eyes wide open. It allows us to laugh and make merry in spite of it all.

This wonderful profession of education that we all share is full of hope. We have hope for our students and their futures, and we have the beauty of a new start every fall where hope is alive, and we are full of expectation and anticipation for what we want to do in the new year and what the new year will bring.

As we gather in worship this day, hope surrounds us. By the power of his life, death and resurrection, Jesus Christ is saving your mind. In loving response, may we use our minds to Christ’s glory and for service in our many places of vocation.

In Christ’s name, Amen.

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