**A Beautiful Mind**

Philippians 4:4-9, Romans 8:35-39

February 21, 2016, David M. Griebner, Riverside UMC

This winter we are studying what is often called *The Great Commandment*. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength,” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” This week have come to the word *mind*; love the Lord your God with all your *mind*. In past weeks, when we’ve tackled heart and soul we needed to adjust our thinking a bit. We discovered that what the Bible means by heart and soul are somewhat different than we commonly use these terms. For example when we think of the heart we may naturally focus on our emotional side or feeling side. And when we think of the soul we think of the part of us that goes to heaven when we die. But what we’ve learned is that both heart and soul point to the whole person. In fact that’s just the point of the commandment. We are to love God with all that we are, every bit of ourselves, all the time.

When we come to what it means to love the Lord with all our mind we face a slightly different kind of problem. As far as I can tell when Jesus speaks of the mind, He means the same thing we mean by it, so that’s not the issue. The issue is that the Bible makes an assumption about our mind that we might not make. Like most people I tend to think of my mind as being reasonably ok. I assume you do too. I know I can forget things, make mistakes, and get lost. I know my mind can wander and come up with ideas and images that I wouldn’t want anyone to know about, but over all I’d say my mind is ok.

But this is not the Biblical view of our mind. According to the Bible our mind is not what it was intended to be. Our mental ability to reliably discern what is ultimately TRUE about who we are, and who God is, what to believe and what to do has been deeply and thoroughly compromised by something – SIN. The result is that we are often blind to the truth. Our ability to consistently choose what is true, and noble and right and pure and lovely, what is admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy is sabotaged from within. Simply put, in large way and in small ways, all too often we are our own worst enemy.

And I learned this week that this perspective is not unique to the Bible. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is a world-renowned psychologist. He currently teaches at Claremont University in California and was previously at the University of Chicago. He is a secular, or non-Christian, academic student of the human mind. He has studied the brain and human consciousness for forty or fifty years. And he has reached an interesting conclusion. “When left to itself the mind turns to bad thoughts, trivial plans, sad memories, and worries about the future. Disorder, confusion and decay are the default options of consciousness.” (Quoted by John Ortberg in *Living In Christ’s Presence*, p. 152)

Did you get that? There isn’t a positive word in the bunch. But this isn’t Jesus or the Bible speaking. This isn’t a preacher or a theologian talking about God. After a lifetime of study this is the rational assessment of the human mind by a secular scholar based on massive scientific observation. And look, I know this doesn’t describe my mind all the time, but I have to admit that it rings true far more often than I would like to admit.

When I read this quote I immediately thought of something St. Paul wrote in Romans chapter 8. Paul says, “The mind governed by the flesh is death…” (Romans 8:6) Isn’t this another way of saying that the mind, *when left to itself turns to bad thoughts, trivial plans, sad memories, and worries about the future?* These are deathly thoughts, are they not? But here’s the good news. While this may be what our mind is like “when left to itself” God has not left us to ourselves, has He? Here’s the whole verse from Romans: “The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.” Because of Jesus and His Spirit we can find another way. Through the Holy Spirit we can begin to recover the mind we were meant to have, a mind governed instead by life and peace.

Paul captures this truth beautifully in Romans 12:2. “Do not be conformed to this present world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God—what is good and well-pleasing and perfect.” (NET Bible) Our natural inclination is to try to fit into, or conform to, the world around us. But this world is also broken. And all too often it is precisely this world that draws us into bad thoughts, trivial plans, sad memories and worries about the future – does it not? Seriously, what does it feel like to watch or read the news? But God’s promise to us in Christ is that things can be different, our mind can be transformed and renewed. The Greek word translated *transformed* is metamorphoo. It is the basis of our word metamorphosis. We use it to describe how a caterpillar becomes a butterfly.

God knows our mind need to be changed, renewed, and restored, that’s the reality. This process isn’t easy. Our minds are not only a little broken, they are deeply broken, and the pressure to conform to this world is not something that will pass easily or quickly. But the vision of what is possible, the vision of how beautiful our mind can become, is absolutely breathtaking.

One of the most beautiful places this vision is captured is also found in Romans 8. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ***For I am convinced*** that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Notice how Paul introduces this astounding, beautiful vision. He says, “I am convinced.” His mind has been changed. The testimony he shares here is rational, reasoned and true. Furthermore it has been tested in ways most of us cannot even begin to appreciate. It has been tested by trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword so much so that Paul often felt like a sheep waiting to be slaughtered, facing death all day long. And yet this vision has been so deeply planted in his mind that he remains utterly convinced that it is true and that it can stand against anything the world throws at it.

How would you like to wake up every morning, go to sleep every night and live every moment in between with this picture so settled in your mind that nothing can dislodge it? How might it change your attitude, your conversations with other people, or how you respond when you are in a hurry, and you end up in the wrong line at the supermarket, and the person in front of you is arguing whether an item is on sale or not, and then they want to pay with a check? What might this do to the bad thoughts, trivial plans, sad memories, and worries about the future that seem to be the hallmark of our mind *left to itself*?

Our mind isn’t what it was meant to be; which means we are not what we were meant to be. So what do we need to do to change? How can we stop conforming and start transforming? We need a partner and a plan.

First we need a partner. Can something that is broken fix itself? Today’s cars can often tell a mechanic what’s wrong, but they still can’t fix themselves. It’s the same with us. We cannot fix ourselves. Our capacity for self-deception is too high. All too often we prefer to make excuses, procrastinate, and tell ourselves only what we want to hear. If our mind is to be changed and renewed we need someone to tell us the truth; we need a partner, we need a counselor, a comforter, a guide. We need the Holy Spirit. Listen to Jesus. “When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth.” (John 16:13) The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. He is our partner, our guide, our friend, our teacher, and our counselor. We cannot set our minds free on our own. We don’t have the key to the lock. I found this statement in a book I’m reading this week: “The child who cries out in the dark feels very different when Mother comes in and turns on the light.” (John Eldredge, *Moving Mountains*, p.34) The Holy Spirit wants to turn on the light. We need a partner.

Second we need a plan. We need a place to begin. I like the invitation Paul sets before us in Philippians 4. “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” How many times have you tried to tell yourself to stop thinking about something that is troubling you only to have it pop up again and again and again? We can’t fix ourselves.

But here’s what we can do. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can pray something like this: At this moment, in this conversation, in this meeting, in my next action, my next decision, in all that lies before me and behind me please give me the strength to be the person Jesus died for and to receive all His strength and power. Help me to think the thoughts, make the plans, and choose the things that You Lord know are true, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy.

I’ve tried to be intentional about this this past week. As a result there were several times when I changed my plans and because I did I know I ended up where I was supposed to be. I can think of a couple other times when I responded to someone with more grace and understanding than was capable with on my own. Of course it wasn’t all good. I can also think of some times when I overreacted, gave in to anger and disgust and fear and the like. I wasn’t proud of what came out of my mouth at that moment, but I recognized it almost immediately, stopped, asked for help, and repented. And the result was that even when I stumbled I knew the Lord was right there. I was not alone with my bad thoughts, trivial plans, sad memories, or worries about the future.

At the Ash Wednesday service I used an illustration from a sermon by Tim Keller that I want to revisit in this context. He said that if you go up to an open piano and speak loudly to it, the strings that are the same note as your voice will vibrate. I assume you can’t actually see this because it is so subtle, but I understand that it is true. From this he drew an analogy about the way the evil one works. He’s always looking for something in us that will respond to his voice or suggestion. But it works the other way too. As we move though our ordinary days the Holy Spirit, who lives in every believer, will speak to the strings of our mind, heart, and soul in a way that will transform us, and continually inspire to think, say, and do more that is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy. And that’s beautiful. Let’s pray…