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Mark 12:28-31

Ephesians 4:17-24

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CHRIST'S CHURCH: RENEWED IN THE SPIRIT OF OUR MINDS

God has given each of us a mind. I am using my mind right now to put a request into words inviting you to use your mind to contemplate the capacities of your own mind. I do that because Jesus used his mind to articulate the highest priority of the commandment calling upon us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. In fact, in the Hebrew version of what Jesus identifies as the first commandment found in Deuteronomy, it calls us to love God with all of our heart, soul, and might, not specifically mentioning the word, 'mind.' That Jesus does include the word 'mind' in the list of our parts that should be fully engaged in loving God indicates it is implied in the Hebrew list, and something Jesus wanted to note.

We Presbyterians believe in thinking and like to think in our believing. That can be a good thing unless we get stuck in our minds, forgetting to love God also with our heart, soul, and strength. The idea is that we are to love God with all of who we are, which Jesus said required loving our neighbor also. But on this day, I ask you to use the three-pound organ with 100 billion neurons under your skull, your amazing God-given mind to focus for a bit on what it means to love God with all of our mind.

During this month, we have been focusing on the fourth chapter of Ephesians, because it gives us indication of how we can show ourselves to be the church that was founded by and is guided by Jesus Christ. Today's reading urges us to be renewed in the spirit of our minds. We certainly can use our minds for less than high-minded purposes. The passage begins with an appeal against walking in the futility of our minds, using them in ways that show a real alienation from the life of God because of our ignorance and hardness of heart. This passage indicates our minds can lose sensitivity to others, and can be focused solely on greedy practices of various kinds of impurity. Instead, we are urged to be renewed in the spirit of our minds. Do you hear the passive voice of that phrase – be renewed? We can't by ourselves renew the spirit of our minds, but we don't have to.

Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister and author whose books have blessed many of us, died this past week. That news reminded me of something he wrote where he said, “The final secret, I think, is this: that the words, “You shall love the Lord your God,” become in the end, less a command than a promise. And the promise is that, yes, on the weary feet of faith and the fragile wings of hope, we will come to love (God) at last as from the first (God) has loved us—loved us even in the wilderness, especially in the wilderness, because (God) has been in the wilderness with us. (God) has been in the wilderness for us. (God) has been acquainted with our grief. And, loving (God), we will come at last to love each other too...”¹ – Buechner. Indeed, the words, ‘You shall love God,’ becoming less a command than a promise is because God’s love is so rich and life-changing that we can grow in that love, we can be renewed in the spirit of our minds by that love.

God gave us our minds. Think about what our minds are able to do. They take in tons of information from our senses and help us make some sense of it all. Our minds can grow in knowledge. They can develop ideas and makes lists like this one. Our minds can dream of what should and could be. They can plan. They can tell our physical bodies to move or to rest. Without thinking about it and beyond our full control, our minds tell our hearts to beat and our lungs to breathe. Our minds give us the capacity to learn language and speak, and also give us the capacity to be quiet and listen. Our minds respond to trauma and can heal from it. Our minds enable us to solve problems, to prioritize, to build mental constructs, to theologize. Our minds can navigate doubts and quandaries. Our minds help us to figure out what is true, and they give us the capacity to decide we want to know what is true. Our minds enable us to be friendly and kind, to build relationships and carry out caring initiatives. They enable us to make choices. They allow us to decide what to pray for and what to work for. They help us discern a sense of vocation. Our minds can help us be mindful. They enable us to live lives of gratitude. If we dig a bit, our minds can also give up the hidden secrets of our implicit biases. Our minds can figure out what is right and what is wrong, what is truly beautiful and what is really ugly, as well as our minds can help us explore ways to right some wrongs. They can help us try to release bitterness. They can help us remember what is significant. They can help us live with bold hopes. They can allow us to laugh at that which builds up instead of that which tears down. They allow us to recognize our brevity of life on this planet and that we do not really own anything.

Our minds can do all of that and more, including for you recognizing some of the things I left off this list. Imagine, yes, use your minds to imagine if all those things our minds can do were done as expressions of love for God, arising out of recognition that it was in response to God's prior love for us. Imagine if all of our learning and dreaming and planning and acting were to show love for God with all of our mind. Imagine if we spent our time and energy figuring out how to love our neighbor fully, instead of trying to limit who we are to consider to be our neighbor. Imagine, yes, use your minds to imagine how else we as a church could express our love for God and for neighbor so are not part of a mindless exercise in futility. Our congregation's Session, our ruling elders put their minds together, prayerfully examining pertinent information and sharing their views with each other as a way to discern God's will for this congregation. As we explore how to live out love for God and neighbor, God renews the spirit of our minds to move away from that which is selfish or divisive, and move toward that which unites and builds a sense of wholeness. We have been given the mental capacity to explore such things. Isn't that great!

What is also great is that there is more to us than just our minds. And God can help us grow in our loving capacity in those areas of our being as well. We shall love God with all of who we are – it becomes a promise and not just a commandment when in our minds, we begin to recognize what God is doing to renew us through love as individuals and as part of Christ's church. We shall love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength, that will enable us to love our neighbor as ourselves. There is no commandment or promise greater than these. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Frederick Buechner, A Room Called Remember, HarperOne, 1992.

