

INTRODUCTION

Good morning. My name is Sue Sweeney and I'm part of the lay preaching team here at Catalyst.

I love to cook and try new recipes. A while back I was really into making frittatas. If you don't know what a frittata is, it's kind of like scrambled eggs, but fancy. One evening, I was making this frittata from a recipe. I started cooking it on the stove in a metal skillet that had a metal handle and then, using a potholder, I stuck the whole thing in the oven to let it finish cooking, per the directions in the recipe.

Everything was coming along nicely, but all that fancy chef work had worn me out a bit, so I decided to lay down on my bed to look at Facebook and Instagram on my phone. Several minutes went by and the oven timer went off, I grabbed a pot holder and pulled my beautiful frittata out of the oven and set it on top of the stove to cool.

This frittata looked amazing. So, naturally, I was feeling like a Food Network TV star. I was already thinking about the best way for me to capture a picture of this culinary masterpiece with my phone for Instagram. I'm sure I was musing to myself, "should I use a filter for my frittata? Should I frittata hashtag no filter?"

I decided I should probably move my beautiful frittata from the stove, over to the kitchen island. The light was better there and would be more flattering for my frittata pic. Apparently, wholly distracted by my thoughts, I reached down, bare handed, no pot-holder, and grabbed the hot metal skillet handle. I burned the crap out of my hand. I rushed over to the sink and ran my hand under cold tap water. The burn was starting to look pretty bad...then the pain set in. For the next couple hours, I experienced the worst pain of my life...and I've given birth...twice. I was in tears. My husband, Jeff, was kind of freaking out, but being trying to be calm and comforting. I called a doctor and determined that I didn't need to go to the hospital. The doc called in a prescription for me and my housemate, Amanda, graciously agreed to go pick it up for me at the pharmacy. I got in my bed and just laid there and cried until Amanda came back with my prescription, some painkillers, and some bandages for my hand.

With the pain under control, the shame and embarrassment of what I did started to settle in. How could I be so stupid? What was I thinking? I knew better than that, to grab a hot pan with my bare hands, but I did it anyway. Apparently, I can trust my mind enough to follow a recipe and produce an amazing frittata, but I can't trust it to keep me from burning the crap out of my hand for no reason?

Do you ever feel like your mind is a little out of control? I mean, not like crazy, but do your thoughts ever seem get away from you a bit?

"The mind works in mysterious ways," as they say. If we want to become the people God intended us to be, then how do we get some more control over our minds? How do we make it easier to focus on the right things?

Loving God with all our minds takes intention on our part. We can't just pray a prayer one time in our lives and expect we're transformed and perfected in God's new life. We work out our salvation- the Spirit moves in us, and we respond.

The Good News is, God's Spirit lives with us and gives us the strength to make ourselves new- to get our minds right.

Will you stand with me this morning? We're getting ready to sing some worship songs. As you sing these songs, reflect on what it might mean for you to love God with all your mind.

SERMON

(Series) We're in a series called [w]hole. We're asking what a whole, healthy human life looks like. To find the answer, we're beginning with Jesus' response to a question he was asked:

One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the debate. He realized that Jesus had answered well, so he asked. "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

This was a common question rabbis of Jesus's day debated. The root of the question is getting at what it means to be fully human- which of God's laws is the ultimate one? Which commandment perfectly encapsulates what it means to be the people of God?

Jesus replied, "The most important commandment is this: 'Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these." - Mark 12:28-31

During this series, we're focusing on the four words in the greatest commandment: heart, soul, mind and strength. What does it look like and sound like for us to love God in these ways? First, we learned from our teaching pastor, JR, that loving God with all our hearts means with every desire we have- both the spiritual and the fleshy. Last week, we saw that to love God with all our soul or self means we have to maintain healthy, strong boundaries that ensure we have the energy to fulfill our God-given calling. Today, we ask what it means to love God with all our minds.

The fact is, our brains are meaning-making machines. Your mind is always looking to make meaning out of our external world- the things people say to us, the things they don't say, the way others look at us, the way other people DON'T look at us. Our mind tries to make sense of all of it. To do this, your mind creates a story of why something happened. Even though we may not know what others' motivations and true intentions are, we guess at them anyway and then we use those assumptions to understand - to make sense out of what is going on.

When we trace the word *mind* through the New Testament, we see quickly that loving God with all our mind isn't really a question of intelligence (which is good because it shouldn't matter how smart you are when it comes to loving God!) Rather, "mind" is really about your thinking. What do you choose to focus your thoughts on?

If you have a Bible, turn with me to Philippians 2. If you picked up one of the Bibles in the back, we're on page ###. If you don't have a Bible of your own, you're welcome to keep that one. This Scripture is a letter Paul wrote to the Church in the Greek city of Philippi. Paul has been reflecting on what it means to be part of the Church, challenging them to love each other, work together, not be selfish. Then, he breaks into a song- one the Philippians sang when they worshiped together. The song grounds his instructions in what Jesus did for us.

"You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

...the same attitude. The Greek word there is *mind*. You want to love God with all your mind? Then, we have to learn the mind of Jesus. We have to see the world the way God sees the world. We have to become selfless, not selfish. What is Jesus's mind? How is it different from ours? Let's read on...

Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross." -Philippians 2:5-8

God's way is upside down. Instead of ME first, it's ME last. Instead of me keeping a record of all the ways others have wronged me, it's me making room for empathy, grace, and understanding. Instead of measuring myself against others in order to make myself feel better, it's about helping others receive a full measure of what they need. It's not about throwing others under the bus, in order to make myself look better. It's about being honest and taking responsibility for my actions. It's not about constantly shielding myself from shame and embarrassment, it's about being bold and unafraid, especially if it means including those the world has shut out.

This is the way Jesus lived and the way Jesus died. He gave himself as a sacrifice, not for his own good, but for ours.

Friends, this is not natural for us. Giving our minds to God takes time and work. But we can do it. In another letter- this one to the Romans, Paul challenges the believers there:

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God- this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Romans 12:1-2

Again, what is meant by the “renewing of your mind?” What does it mean to have a mind that is not conformed to the pattern of the world? If your mind drives your behaviors and actions, then what are the behaviors of the world?

Don't copy the behaviors and patterns of this world! Let God change the way you think. Then you'll know God's will. Another writer said it this way,

“They were told that their messages were not for themselves, but for you. And now this Good News has been announced to you by those who preached in the power of the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. It is all so wonderful that even the angels are eagerly watching these things happen. So prepare your minds for action and exercise self-control. Put all your hope in the gracious salvation that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed to the world. So you must live as God's obedient children. Don't slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires. You didn't know any better then. But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy.” - 1 Peter 1:12-15

Prepare your minds for action. Exercise self-control. Learn to live as God's obedient children. Don't slip back into your old ways of living. You didn't know any better then. But now, be holy in everything.

This idea of “preparing our minds” is also supported by neuroscience. As Paul said in Romans, we can be transformed by the renewing of our minds. It's spiritual AND scientific! Let me explain how:

The human brain is host to more than 100 billion neurons. These neurons are connected to each other in numerous ways. If you hold your hand up like this, the palm of your hand is like the cell and the nucleus of the neuron. Your fingers are like the dendrites.

Actually, the word dendrite comes from the Greek word *dedron* for “tree.” These protrusions, shown here as your fingers, provide an area where the neuron can receive neurotransmitters. Neurotransmitters are the chemicals that “message” information throughout your body. These dendrites (wiggle fingers) are where other neurons often connect and where neurotransmitters are received.

Your arm, all the way down to your elbow is the axon, which comes from the Greek word for axis or axle. Your elbow then represents the *synapse*, which comes from the Greek word to clasp, connect, or join. This is the point where the neurons communicate- where neurotransmitters are transmitted to another neuron.

So, this is how it works: a neuron inputs information through its dendrites (fingers). The information is processed by the nucleus (palm) and sent down the axon (the arm) where it is released into the synapse (elbow) where it can make a new connection.

The more focus and attention we give something, the “stronger” that neural connection in our mind becomes. When you create new synaptic connections, your mind is literally renewing. When our brains form a memory or we learn to do something in a new way, new neural connections are created and those new neural pathways become more powerful.

And get this, our old ways of thinking...made up of our old neural pathways, begin to deteriorate from lack of use. Regarding neurons, you gotta use ‘em or lose ‘em. Which, if these were neural pathways connected to our participation in destructive behaviors and habits, then good riddance! Don’t let the door hit you on the way out!

This idea that we can create new neural pathways and lose old ones is called *neuroplasticity*. Plasticity refers to our brain’s ability to be shaped or changed by the world around us. When we experience challenging new tasks, our brain develops new and stronger synaptic connections. New and better connections become stronger while old, unnecessary connections begin to die away.

In his famous book, *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau writes, "The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity!"

The surface of the earth is soft and impressible and because of neuroplasticity, we’re learning that our minds and our thoughts are impressible as well. We can impress a new neural pathway that will lead us to freedom and life. We can leave the old, destructive pathways behind and eventually they will disappear.

Easier said than done, right? If simply thinking happy thoughts was all it took to make our lives better, then why is life still so difficult?

The more we walk the right path, the easier it is for us to become the people of God. This is Good News because God wired our brains to be changeable.

So, how do we focus on the right path when our it’s so easy for our thoughts to get out of control? How can we become people who think thoughts that make us want to bring more love, joy, and peace into the world. How can we develop our minds to help us be more patient, kind, good and faithful?

Spiritual practices keep us in the Spirit, listening to the Spirit’s voice in our lives and ready to respond. A practice particularly helpful to the renewing of our minds is the *Lectio Divina* or “Sacred Reading.” Reading Scripture is a good way to receive instruction on how to make decisions that get us closer to a whole person..the person God intends us to be. A person who does not regularly read Scripture is not focusing on the right things. They are not getting their mind right.

But reading Scripture is difficult. The Bible is 2,000 years old, written by cultures very different from ours. If you've ever tried to read Scripture, you know it can be a frustrating task. This is where the Sacred Reading comes in. The process is designed to help you hear God's voice speaking through the Scriptures. It has three stages.

First, choose a passage that's not too long- a chapter at most. Read it through the chapter slowly, taking in the text.

Second, read the text again, and this time, pay attention to a word or phrase that sticks out to you. Note the word or phrase.

Finally, read the text a third time. This time, prayerfully ask God, "What shall I do?" and focus on the word or phrase that stuck out to you. After you have completed the third reading, spend a few minutes in silent prayer or journaling, meditating on the Scripture you've read and consider what you're hearing from God.

The Sacred Reading is a technique Christians have used for hundreds of years to learn to hear God speaking through the Scriptures. As we immerse ourselves in what God said to our ancient fathers and mothers, we learn to see the world as God sees the world. We learn to hear God speaking to us today.

We read Scripture because we recognize that our minds are dark. We confess that we don't know how to see the world the way God sees the world.

Friends, our minds, left to their own devices, can't always be trusted. We need to make time and space for the Holy Spirit to renew our minds. When we focus on our own selfish desires at the expense of the real and important needs of others, it leads us toward a path of sinfulness.

Communion + Examen

We come to the Table today to receive God's grace. Jesus invites us to join him and his followers at the meal they shared the night before he was killed. At that meal, he offered us bread as his body, broken for us. Later, he gave us a cup of wine. He said, "This is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sin."

We come to the table to see the Way of God. We see here the mind of Christ on display: Jesus gave up his own life that we might be saved. By coming to the table, we participate in Jesus' death, become more conformed to his way.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive communion with us. If you're willing to receive the mind of Christ, to begin to see the world in God's upside-down way, then you're welcome to join us.

Before we come, I'm going to lead us in a Prayer of Examen. I'm going to ask you a series of questions and give you space to reflect prayerfully on them. Then, I'll pray for us all, and as you're ready, you can approach the table.

Here's the first question:

1. When in the last week have I seen the world God's way?
2. When in the last week have I seen the world, myself or others in a way that Jesus doesn't?
3. When in the next week might I look at the world, myself or others in a way Jesus doesn't?
4. How can I make space to allow the Holy Spirit to renew my mind this week?

Let's pray together:

God, our creator, you have gathered us here to reflect on how we see the world. We confess that too often, we see the world not as you do, but as our culture does. We see with eyes that are selfish, fearful, prideful. But we have heard your loving invitation this morning to love you with our minds, to allow you to give us new eyes, new minds, a new way to see the world, our neighbors and ourselves.

We approach your table this morning to receive wafers and juice. We pray they become a spiritual food, that we might receive the grace from you we need to renew our minds, to receive your mind. Thank you for calling us together, and for making us your people.

We offer these prayers and approach your table in the name of your son, Jesus.

Benediction