

## **Signs, Wisdom and Faith**

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Text: I Corinthians 1:18-24 John 3:13-17

Pete Seeger once said, “Any idiot can write a complicated song. It takes a genius to write a simple song.” It is a truism that applies to most things in life. Anyone can make an ethical decision complicated. It sometimes takes a prophet such as Dr. King to make ethics simple. Lots of people can play complicating, deceptive games with government budgets. But every child and an increasing number of U.S. taxpayers know that one and one always equals two and no budget game can change that reality. So yes, we oftentimes make life far more difficult than it really is, sometimes even as we try to make things easier.

For several years after college, I worked as a meat packer at the Oscar Mayer plant in Madison, Wisconsin. One day I was walking by the loading dock where boxes of product came flying down conveyors to waiting workers who stacked them in trucks for delivery. You really had to know what you were doing to avoid falling behind and getting overwhelmed by the relentless onslaught of boxes. It was both a highly skilled and very physical job.

On this particular day, the loading dock crew was sitting outside smoking and laughing. I asked whether the line was down for repair. They replied, “No, John, there are some really, really smart college guys working with us this summer. They who think they can do the job much more efficiently than we can, even though most of us have been doing it for fifteen years or more. Applying some principle they learned in physics class, they said the three of them could do what it takes six of us to do. So we are taking a smoke break and giving them the chance.” I opened the door to see how the physics students were doing. Long story short, the loading dock

floor was covered with boxes scattered all over the place and the students looked like they were about to cry, collapse or both. By thinking too hard, they had succeeded in making a difficult job impossible.

Paul had a keen awareness of our tendency to make life more complicated than it is. He wrote to the congregation in Corinth: “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” Indeed, taught Paul, it was a peasant carpenter who lifted the veil between us and the truth, revealing just how unambiguous a faithful life can be. The author of John’s Gospel distilled the matter of salvation down to: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

In complicated, confusing, convoluted times such as our own, we need to return to the simple basics of how we live a faithful life. We need to regain appreciation for the humble, eternal truths upon which God’s creation is built and happy, productive lives are created. For example, after decades of over-thinking our options in life, it turns out it really is smarter to forgive rather than seek vengeance; live humbly rather than hubristically; work one’s way up rather than expect to be moved up; open a door for others rather than opening one for ourselves. It turns out families do matter; quality education does make a difference; living within our means is the only way to be financially secure.

Amidst all the tragic unemployment, foreclosures and rising poverty in this nation, I see something very healthy taking place. People like you and me are being forced to recognize the truth of what Paul proclaimed. The wisdom of the world can be and often is foolishness. And we have bought much of this worldly wisdom hook, line and sinker.

Worldly wisdom is problematic because we humans can convince ourselves that our half-baked ideas are fully baked. For centuries, some very smart people believed that women and

people of color were inherently inferior; homosexuals were sinners; addiction was a moral rather than a medical problem. Smart guys like Alan Greenspan convinced himself and many of us that it was safe to build an economy on financial instruments built on questionable assets. Yes, worldly wisdom can be and often is foolishness.

For the past thirty years or so, the supposedly wise of this nation have led the body politic into one tangential, foolish debate after another by ideologues from the left and right. We have debated burning the flag, prayer in schools, creationism, and Swift boats to name a few. Amidst foreclosures and unemployment, the voters of Oklahoma spent the fall debating and approving a state referendum banning the use of sharia law in secular courts. Meanwhile, the test scores of our children drop in relation to their peers overseas; our infrastructure crumbles; our troops are overextended; our debt climbs.

I would suggest that many Americans today are flat-out embarrassed by our behavior. We are embarrassed that we ever bought into the idea that we could purchase houses we couldn't afford, fight wars that weren't absolutely necessary, believed that the A we received in some class was actually an A when, in our heart of hearts, we knew we didn't deserve an A, that we could cut taxes and increase spending and still have a balanced budget, could ignore the growing gap between rich and poor and call ourselves a model democracy for the world.

We are embarrassed that we thought families could break up with no significant damage to the family members or society; Christian denominations could tolerate sexual misconduct by their clergy and not lose their integrity; that taking ever more time using social media wouldn't warp some of our most important family relationships for whom we now have less time.

Surely, as any student of history knows, we aren't the first to overestimate our own wisdom and that of the world. Like us, the Romans believed their Empire would last forever.

Their's didn't. Ours won't. When I think of a sober-minded people, historically, I think of the Dutch. And yet, in 1634, the infamous tulip fad appeared amidst the Dutch who, like us, were a people renowned for their business prowess. For three bizarre years, a rare black tulip bulb became equal in worth to a large Dutch mansion. When the speculative bubble popped, tulips lost 96% of their value almost overnight as people realized that a tulip bulb was, well, a tulip bulb.

Gratefully, some of the world's wisdom turns out to be just that: wise. Read Shakespeare, Toni Morrison or Chinua Achebe and we find page after page of profound wisdom. Follow columnists ranging from Fareed Zakaria to David Brooks to Peggy Noonan and we regularly discover nuggets of wisdom. However, much of what poses as wisdom in the world is, as Paul calls it, foolishness.

If the wisdom of this world can be and often is foolishness, how do we distinguish between what is truly wise and what is foolishness dressed as wisdom? Clearly, we need a filter that sifts out the bad from the good, a standard or benchmark by which wisdom can be measured. The filter/benchmark is Jesus. Jesus is the filter through which Christians process all that poses as wisdom in the world; the benchmark against which we judge everything. If the wisdom of the world is consistent with what Jesus taught and how he lived, it is good as gold. If not, it is fools gold.

When an organization's ethos is dominated by worldly wisdom, it can convince itself that it is all right to cook the books, treat employees as disposable throw-aways, and focus solely on quarterly rather than long-term profitability. However, when an organization is aligned with the baseline values revealed in God's Word, such group think is quickly recognized for what it is: foolishness.

When a marriage or other relationship is rooted in the teachings of Jesus, both individuals are sensitive to the needs of the other person, not just their own needs. They work harder on sustaining their relationship than they do at sustaining their careers. When a marriage drifts away from God's values, the couple may very well drift away from each other.

When a job search is guided by a quest for God's calling and not just for a job that will represent another step higher on the ladder, it leads to meaning and purpose. If not, it may lead to more money but not necessarily more satisfaction.

When we forsake the understandable desire to strike back at someone who has hurt us, we realize the truth of Jesus' instruction to turn the other cheek. You know, if we think about Jesus' teaching on turning the other cheek in the abstract, as a hypothetical, it makes absolutely no sense. Indeed, it sounds like total nonsense. But when we do it, we feel a power swelling up within us that is nothing short of divine. Even as our slapped cheek smarts, we know that we are the ones who are smart for not striking back.

Every time is a time for God's Word. But today is REALLY a time for God's Word as revealed in and through Jesus Christ. Today, you and I need an authoritative, clear benchmark by which we can judge what is right and what is wrong; where to go and where not to go; to whom we should listen and whom we should ignore.

Of course, it is easy to dismiss Jesus' teaching in the Bible. Reacting to biblical literalists, we Presbyterians love to talk about how the Bible is filled with contradictions. It is. It cannot be read literally. The Good Book contains just enough contradictions to keep us from thinking we have a total and complete lock on the truth.

But the Bible doesn't contradict itself on the basics, on the type of issues upon which we need to focus in our current time. Scripture is unequivocal and undeniable that the stranger, the

immigrant, is to be welcomed into our society and homes, not made into a political target; that the poor have a special place in God's heart and they better have the same place in our hearts; that lying, stealing, or cheating on a loved one are wrong, no ifs-and-or-buts about it; that power is to be exercised for the welfare of all, not a few; that families are at the heart of God's creative plan; that God's creation is a stewardship responsibility not a profit-center.

I love the internet. It is downright painful to remember how much research work in the library I had to do to write a sermon in the pre-internet era. However, the internet has also made the foolishness of the world more accessible than at any time in history. I spend an inordinate amount of time responding to and debunking some supposed fact that someone has picked up on a blog, website or in an email.

Inundated with all this information coming to us via the Internet, email, Twitter, Facebook and other sources, some true, much false, more than ever, we need a reliable, trustworthy guide to help us separate out the Word from all the words. For Jews, the guide is the Torah. For Muslims, it is the Koran. For you and me, it is Jesus. Jesus is our Authority.

Using Jesus as our guide, when someone says that Muslims are to be feared, let us ask ourselves how Jesus would have responded to such a proposition. When someone asserts that the wealthiest 2% of this nation, not the middle class, are the "drivers" of this economy; that the safest nation is one whose borders are protected by troops and high walls; that a divorce is sad but, really, no big deal; that more and more citizens carrying guns is a good thing; that an educational system is fine despite being increasingly segregated by the income of the student's parents; when someone asserts such things, let us ask ourselves what Jesus might say, might have done.

Even asking that crucial question, we won't always get it right. But by merely posing the

question, we increase exponentially the chances that we will end up aligned with God's Word rather than the foolish wisdom of this world.

As that scene on the loading dock at Oscar Mayer revealed, wisdom isn't about the academic education we possess or the position in society we hold. It is about diligently, dutifully doing what we are supposed to do. In August 1980, Lech Walesa and eleven other workers organized a strike at the Gdansk shipyard in Poland. Within a week, 700,000 workers were striking. By the end of the month, 9.5 million Poles had joined the battle for self-determination. There was no Facebook, email or Twitter in those days. Cell phones were almost nonexistent. Few of the folks leading the strike had higher educations. But they knew what was right and what was wrong and they did something about it.

As a result, a dozen individuals (a dozen!) focused on doing what needed to be done, got to work doing God's work. They communicated their strategy to the next person and the next and the next. Within a decade, Poland was free of Soviet oppression. They didn't have a bunch of geniuses in their midst. But they knew what Jesus, the prophets and the saints would have done if they were in Gdansk and they did it.

True wisdom is rooted in humbly respecting the limitations of what we know and don't know and then acting on what we know. Approaching God in search of wisdom, modestly admitting the limitations of our ability to discern the truth, we open ourselves to the New Life offered to us in Jesus Christ.

May each put aside the complicated songs we have been writing individually and collectively and instead write a simple one, the basic elements of which consist of God, family, and friends, good educations and sound financial planning, a respectful connection with the planet and productive work. As we do so, our lives will feel less foolish and more faithful; less

precarious and more like we are standing on a Rock.

Let us pray: Gracious God, you sent Jesus into the world to reveal your Word and serve as our guide. However, too often, we become convinced that we are smarter than you and everyone else, that we don't need your guidance or that of our friends. Bring us back to your Way.

Walking with you, may we find the life we sought when we strayed into pastures we thought were greener but turned out to be barren. In the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.