

September 23, 2007

Rev. Anne M. Rosebrock

MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

THEOLOGY OF STARBUCKS: DECAFFEINATED WISDOM

Luke 13:6-10

Jesus often uses stories to make a point. He took metaphors from his time and common experience and shaped them to speak not only to the people who were sitting next to him, but those same metaphors continue to sing across the ages.

I have read that as we move into a pervasive wireless world we are stepping into a renaissance in the Information Age. Information is everywhere because information can be accessed in so many different ways.

Author Thomas Friedman writes in his book, *The World is Flat, A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, these words: “because what the flattening of the world means is that we are now connecting all the knowledge centers on the planet together into a single global network, which – if politics and terrorism do not get in the way – could usher in an amazing era of prosperity, innovation, and collaboration by companies, communities and individuals.”

Starbucks understood the reality of global networking and prepared. One of the expectations of going into a Starbucks store is that you enter into a wireless environment. For those of you who are not yet totally computer dependent, WiFi is short hand for wireless fidelity connection. No plugs or cables are needed to access the Internet. You may enter a Starbucks store with your laptop computer or hand held phone and make a wireless connection and interact with someone across the planet. If you do not enter the store with a laptop computer, have no fear. You still have access to information as you may purchase a variety of newspapers at Starbucks or you can simply sit, sip and read the back of your coffee cup.

“Starbucks says it was hoping to inspire old-fashioned coffee-house conversations when it introduced a campaign this year (2005) featuring the words of notable Americans on its coffee cups.” Lornet Turnbull, Seattle Times, 2005

Starbucks began a campaign called, “The Way I See It.” The campaign was designed to get people talking to each other about the words printed on the back of the cups. For some, the words on the back of the cup signify wisdom, for others conflict. Starbucks does not seem interested in general acceptance of the writings, but rather that the writings stimulate thinking and conversation.

Our world is a smorgasbord of information. We wander through newspapers, magazines, television newscasts, radio talk shows, the Internet and like a bookstore I visited this week, “Books-A- Million”. We love information; we are driven toward acquiring more and more information. I think we enjoy both acquiring information and appearing knowledgeable. We want to be seen as one who holds information- that we are an expert on this subject or that and

better yet we would love to be seen as an expert on many subjects. In the process, we have become adept at multi-tasking as we acquire information.

As I see it, information involves the mind, the intellect and we have more information than we will ever be able to process. Wisdom on the other hand engages the mind, the heart and soul. It is wisdom that will change your life and mine; it is wisdom that we ultimately seek.

The passage from Luke is part of a much larger section of this Gospel focused on the teachings of Jesus. Jesus has just reminded his listeners that we are all called to repent – to turn back toward God. He speaks directly to those gathered and proclaims that unless we repent, turn toward God, we will perish. At the heart of this teaching is not that we will die, for we will all certainly die, but Jesus speaks of a fate worse than death, without a deeply connected relationship with God, we will suffer a reality far worse than death, we will perish. Apart from God, we will wilt on the vine. We may very well have breath, but we will not be fully alive, we will be shriveled in spirit and going through the motions in life without a sense of abundant life. It is right after this teaching on repentance that Jesus tells the story of the fig tree.

For three years, the fig tree has stood in the vineyard and produced no fruit at all. The owner has had enough. He has no need of a tree that does not bear fruit. He makes his living off the fruit of the vine and the trees in the vineyard. He has no interest in wasting a piece of land on this tree that offered nothing in return. This teaching would have been easily understood by those listening to Jesus. They understood that land is precious and that the owners' livelihood depended on the fruit. But the fig tree is merely a metaphor. Jesus is ultimately speaking about Israel. First Jesus calls Israel to repent and then in the turning back to God, to embrace God's grace and mercy. The owner of the fig tree says, "Cut down that tree." It is the intercession of the vinedresser that gives the tree another chance. In the nurturing of the tree, fruit is certain to appear. There is still time. It is in repentance, it is in nurture of spirit and soul that life is lived to the fullest.

God balances judgment and mercy. Be assured that we are held responsible and accountable for our actions as individuals and as a nation. At the same time, we are also nurtured by God's mercy and grace. The wisdom that Jesus offers to us is to turn fully toward God, accept responsibility for the errors of our past and to root our lives in the mercy and grace God offers us and others.

So often, when we find one who has lost his or her way, we offer judgment, we shun, we step away rather than offering nurture and care. It is God who is ever ready for us to turn back toward God and it is God who offers us care and compassion. Rooted in relationship with the Divine, we too bear fruit and begin to see others and the world in a new light.

One of the writers for "The Way I See It" campaign for Starbucks is James Dyson, creator of the Dyson vacuum system. He offers these words:

“Some of the best inventive moments were born out of “wrong thinking.” Most people start with the right way so they all follow the same path. The wrong way will lead to mistakes from which you can learn and create new discoveries – the kind of original ideas that come to life when we dare to be different, keep an open mind and have no fear of failure.”

I am not suggesting that following the path of Jesus is the wrong thinking, but following Jesus is choosing a distinctive path. Original ideas come to life when we dare to be different, dare to keep an open mind and dare not fear failure. Our relationship with the Divine sets us apart as we dare to be different in this culture by taking seriously our love relationship with God. In the nurturing of our faith we grow an open mind and heart and growing confident in our faith, we need not fear failure. In the nurturing of the fig tree, fruit is expected. In the nurturing of our love relationship with God, fruit is assured.

That fruit grows from the Spirit of God within us and is expressed in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. It takes imagination to see the difference that God can make in our life. It takes imagination to envision change within our life and within this community of faith. It takes imagination to see the world differently, to live in the world differently, and to allow God’s vision to become our vision.

It was Albert Einstein who is credited with saying “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” It takes imagination to look at the barren fig tree and see fruit. It takes imagination to look beyond our pursuit of information and embrace our real need for wisdom. Wisdom has little to do with education, but grows out of our attention to mind, heart and soul. Wisdom is rooted in awe and worship of God, in embracing the love God holds for us. Wisdom grows from our connection to God as we mature in our faith, as we nurture our life with the teachings of Jesus, as we nurture our connection to each other as a faith community, and as we nurture our willingness to see differently, to live differently, to be set apart as the people of God.

To quote the Thomas Friedman book again, “We need to think more seriously than ever about how we encourage people to focus on productive outcomes that advance and unite civilization – peaceful imaginations that seek to ‘minimize alienation and celebrate interdependence rather than self-sufficiency, inclusion rather than exclusion,’ openness, opportunity, and hope rather than limits, suspicion, and grievance.” (*The World is Flat*, p.545 as stated by Irving Wladawsky-Berger)

Wisdom engages information and imagination. Wisdom invites the soul to frame our thinking. Wisdom invites the soul to frame our living. Wisdom engages our imagination to see the world made new and to live in a new way in the world.

We are that fruit tree. We have yet to fully produce the beautiful fruit that we are capable of producing. We have yet to fully imagine the changes God envisions for us as individuals and as a faith community. We have become so invested in gaining information that we have allowed the world to dictate our vision even though that reality is far less than God planned for us. We

are so sure that playing it safe is the right answer that we are closed to the nurture God offers us. The fig tree was a metaphor for Israel and continues to live as a metaphor for us as individuals, as a community of faith, and as a nation.

To quote *The Gospel of Starbucks'* author, Leonard Sweet, "Just like every computer is simply hardware until it is formatted by software, metaphors format life. The question is whether we will choose metaphorical software that will format our lives on a soul-growing or soul-destroying grid. The controlling metaphors control life, either toward the passion of God or away from it."

Wisdom invites us toward the passion of God. Wisdom invites us to center our days in the grace of God, to set our relationship with God as the priority of our living, to teach our children the foundations of our faith, to tell the stories of Jesus, and to find in those stories the teachings that broaden our imagination and begin to reshape our thinking, our seeing, and our living. Experiencing life not as an opportunity to acquire or secure, but to share and release.

One of the items on the menu at Starbucks is Café Americano. Basically, this is espresso that is watered down. So much of what we call wisdom in this culture is watered down; it's weak and often decaffeinated.

If we are seeking our wisdom off the back of a coffee cup, or in a blog by some unknown entity on the internet, or by a columnist in a daily newspaper, or on talk radio, we will be disappointed. True wisdom engages the mind, the heart, and the soul. There is plenty of information out there in the world, but for life in abundance, information is not nearly enough, and human opinion inadequate.

May we hear clearly the wisdom of Jesus: "repent", turn toward God fully and completely without reservation. Turn toward the Divine and offer mind, body and soul to God's love. Expect to be changed; begin to see with new eyes. Engage your imagination and begin to see the Kingdom that God envisions. Be prepared, for as you turn face to face with the Divine, right here and right now, you will begin to experience the fruits of the Spirit. Feel it. Love, the unconditional, all consuming love of God for you. Experience it. Joy, that spark that may be buried deep within, but cannot be denied and peace, a peace unlike any in this world. Thanks be to God.