
Divine Folly - Lenten Wisdom

A sermon by the Rev. Thee Smith
3rd Sunday in Lent

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and redeemer. Amen. (Ps. 19.14).

St. Paul said,

God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength (1 Cor. 1.25)

On this 3rd Sunday in Lent we are challenged by this scripture to preach foolishness as wisdom—the foolishness of the Cross as the wisdom of God, and to preach weakness as strength—the weakness of the Cross as the strength of God. Let's see if we can meet that double challenge!

Preaching the Cross of Christ as foolishness and weakness is doubly challenging because there is something in human nature that can't tolerate letting God be about foolishness and weakness. There is something in us instead that insists that divine things pertain only to wisdom and power.

But in our reading for today the apostle claims that such insistence is really about human wisdom and power, not about divine wisdom and divine power. "For since," Paul explains in today's reading,

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe (1 Cor. 1.21).

It's as if—the apostle implies—as if God has established a spiritual "firewall" or "roadblock" that prevents us from direct access to divine things through wisdom and power. Paul also implies that God did this because human wisdom endemically rejects God.

So God perennially establishes an alternate route to salvation, a pathway of foolishness and weakness as God's "way of making a way out of no way"—to quote the gospel song. It is this alternative pathway of foolishness and weakness that is encapsulated in the Cross of Christ.

As the apostle goes on to say just a few verses after today's reading:

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are (1 Cor. 1.27-28).

Perhaps our inability to believe in this divine alternative to our conventional wisdom is the same element in human nature that is scandalized by God becoming human or incarnate in the Christ child. God as a helpless infant is intolerable to that part of us that demands that God be something more than someone like us.

We want "the Holy one" to be more than someone who was nurtured and mentored in a peasant family; more than someone from a provincial Palestinian country region; more than someone whose existence lacks evidence of being recorded as significant.

But instead of documentable history we have disputable gospels; instead of monuments we have movements; instead of proof we have faith: or in the apostle's word, instead of worldly things like wisdom and power we have divine things in the form of foolishness and weakness. We have the Cross of Christ.

Our challenge is to be people of faith for whom the divine preference for foolishness and weakness is our preference too. As the apostle says elsewhere in 2nd Corinthians (not in today's texts in 1st Corinthians)"and he seems to say so triumphantly:

[God] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'

So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.
10Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor. 12.9,10).

Perhaps the degree to which we believe what Paul claims here is the degree to which we are or are not people of faith. For, as he writes in today's reading,

Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom.

"But we," he then declares by contrast,

we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles . . .

And then he finishes with a rousing affirmation:

but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1.22-24).

So that's our challenge: affirming ourselves as 21st century believers who are also "the called of God." And if we are "the called of God," how are we doing with the call to declare, "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God?" If you're like me, you may be more like the engineer in that joke about the engineer and the guillotine. Here's how it goes.

The story goes that three types of characters were found guilty of certain charges. And all three were condemned to death by guillotine"that machine that executes people by means of a falling blade.

The first person to be put on the block was a clergy character, who stepped up with bowed head and waited for the blade to fall. The executioner pulled the rope but the blade got caught somehow and

couldn't come down. The minister was euphoric and shouted characteristically, "God has decreed it! I'm innocent of the charges!" Then the minister was pardoned, set free, and went away rejoicing.

The second person put on the block was a lawyer. Again the rope failed to release the blade. Characteristically the lawyer announced that a condemned person can't be executed twice on the same charges; likewise was pardoned and also set free.

The third character put on the block was an engineer. The same thing happened: the executioner pulled the rope but the mechanism failed to work. Also characteristically the engineer looked up, pointed to the mechanism, and explained triumphantly,

"I see the problem: the cable is getting hung-up right *there*, you just need to fix that and then it'll work just fi, fi, fi,"

And right there he sputtered to a stop as he finally realized what he was doing in his pride of knowledge and in his foolishness; his folly.

Well, end of story""in more ways than one! Yes, no matter how smart we are we're not always capable of *enlightened* self-interest!

But what if we turn this story into a parable about ourselves; about our human preference for power and wisdom? What if we are like an engineer who can't bear it that the Cross of Christ operates inefficiently and providentially""sparing some and claiming others; and who insist instead on fixing it according to our own wisdom even if that leads to our own loss of divine grace or self-destruction at our own hand?

And what if it's a parable for people like us who think we can fix the world according to conventional wisdom without the Cross of Christ being at the center of it all?

Well, there are mysteries here for which we hardly have words, and we are reduced to explaining such mysteries like people who must say things they don't really understand. And neither do I understand. Never mind; the Spirit speaks to our hearts deeper than our minds can fathom, in order that we may know more by the obscurity of divine wisdom than by the clarity of human knowledge.

That is why we are people of faith and people of the Cross and not people of certainty and people of power. And that is why the spirituality of human certainty and human success is a counterfeit spirituality for us, because the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ keeps thwarting and undermining our conventional wisdom. (Cf. The Spirituality of Imperfection.*) As the apostle says in 1 Corinthians today, quoting the prophet Isaiah:

For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." (1 Cor. 1.19; cf. Isa. 29.14)

But it is precisely in that way that our loving Lord also rescues and saves us from our entrapment in human forms of wisdom and power.

And that is why we pray the following Collect appointed for this Third Sunday in Lent every year. [You may find it on page 218 of the Book of Common Prayer in the pew rack in front of you.]

The Lord be with you. [And also with you.]

Let us pray. [The Collect for the 3rd Sunday in Lent:]

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

* Cf. The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning by Katherine Ketcham and Ernest Kurtz (Dec 1, 1993)

http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_ss_i_4_16?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=spirituality+of+imperfection+kurtz&srefix=spirituality+of+%2Cstripbooks%2C428

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