

BLACKSBURG PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
SUNDAY, SEPTMEBER 20, 2009  
REV. WILLIAM L. LOVE

THE WISDOM OF LOWLINESS

Job 28:20-28  
James 3:13-18  
Mark 9:30-37

If a woman were to go to a podiatrist, she might be told that she has fallen arches. If the same woman were to listen to a poet, she might be told that *she walks in beauty, like the night*. [Byron, "*She Walks in Beauty*"]

Both the podiatrist and the poet are telling the truth, each in his own way. The issue is what kind of truth you are after. [Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, 86]

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*Jesus and the disciples went on and passed through Galilee. And Jesus would not have any one know it, for Jesus was teaching the disciples. But they did not understand, and they were afraid to ask Jesus.*

The disciples did not understand. And they were afraid to ask and find out, which is enough to make you wonder what kind of truth they were after. And maybe even to wonder what kind of truth we are after.

\* \* \*

We live in an information age. We have the ability to gather and store an incredible amount of information. And we have the technology to retrieve and disseminate that information with incredible speed. There is available to us a greater amount of information than we could reasonably use.

And we and our culture seem to operate on the assumption that information is knowledge. And we seem to believe that to verify, collate, and organize the information is the same as understanding.

But information can only verify that one has fallen arches and has no way of knowing whether one walks in beauty like the night.

What kind of truth are we after?

\* \* \*

The disciples did not understand, and they were afraid to ask.

Martin Heidegger makes a helpful distinction in his *Discourse on Thinking*. He describes us as having developed increasing technology to gather, store, and retrieve information but not having the ability to discern the value of the bits of information we gather.

Heidegger calls that ***thinking that calculates***. That kind of thinking computes. It computes new possibilities and more economical ways of doing them. It tells if it is possible to do something but does not have the ability to say if it is worth doing.

Heidegger distinguishes *thinking that calculates* from ***thinking that meditates***. *Thinking that meditates* contemplates meaning. What does something mean? What is it worth? What is its value?

*Thinking that meditates* leads toward wisdom as it reflects on the meaning of life, our life.

*Thinking that calculates* leads to the knowledge of what we know empirically and what is knowable empirically and what can be done with what is known.

*Thinking that meditates* leads to the wisdom of what is worth knowing and what

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is worth doing.

It is perhaps the difference between the podiatrist and the poet. One can speak only of fallen arches. The other can speak of walking in beauty.

What kind of truth are we after?

\* \* \*

*Jesus and the disciples went on and passed through Galilee. And Jesus would not have anyone know it, for Jesus was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of human beings and will be killed by them, and having been killed by them, will rise after three days."*

*But the disciples did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask Jesus.*

*And they came to Capernaum, and having entered the house, Jesus asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest.*

Jesus tried to teach them that his being the Messiah meant to die and rise again. They talked about which of them was the greatest.

Their kind of thinking calculated that they should seek position and power, and they offered reasons why this one or that one was or was not the greatest.

\* \* \*

Once a preacher stood up and, without first reading his Scripture, began to talk:

*There was this guy, he said, who came home from work one day wearing a fine looking new coat. He walked up to his house, and his kids were playing in the yard, and they saw that he was wearing a new coat. "Hey, Daddy," they said, "you got a new coat?"*

*"Yeah. You like it? You like my new coat?"*

*And he went into his house, and his wife said, "You got a new coat."*

*"Yeah," he said. "You like it?"*

*"What did you do that for? You know we can't afford for you to go out and buy a new coat."*

*"I didn't buy it."*

*"You didn't steal it, did you?"*

*"No. I didn't steal it."*

*"Then somebody gave it to you."*

*"No. Nobody gave it to me."*

*"Then where did you get it."*

*"I won it in a crap game."*

*"You've never won anything in a crap game."*

*"Well, I won this coat. You see, we had crucifixion detail today. There were three of them. And the guy in the middle had this nice coat."*

*"You didn't shoot craps right below somebody that was being crucified, somebody that was dying? You didn't play a game of chance at the foot of the cross?"*

*"Yeah. In fact, I think I saw some of you folks there," the preacher said. [Fred Craddock, **Preaching IV**]*

\* \* \*

*The Christ must be delivered into the hands of people and will be killed by them*

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*and having been killed, will rise after three days. And the disciples did not understand this saying, and they were afraid to ask Jesus. And that was playing a game of chance at the foot of the cross.*

*And along the way, they discussed with one another who was the greatest. And that was a game of chance they were playing.*

And I think we were seen there, too.

And by the way we live our lives, we play games of chance at the foot of the cross.

The epistle of James speaks of jealousy and ambition. And those are games of chance that we play. The gospel speaks of discussing who is the greatest. And that is a game of chance that we play.

And a part of that desire to be the greatest (or, at least, to be of heroic proportion in our own life) – a part of what goes along with that desire seems to be the assumption that we draw a line between us and those who are not like us, who are too lowly. We can choose our friends, can't we?

And we can only reach out to them in a way that is not receptive and welcoming but condescending. And we call them those who are less fortunate, as if they were different. And we can only reach down to them, rather than becoming last of all and servant of all and reaching up to help the lowly.

It is easy to love those who love us, who are like us. E. B. White said, *It is easier to be loyal to your club than to your planet; the by-laws are shorter, and you are personally acquainted with the other members.*

*Thinking that calculates* could justify that, would let us draw the line. The question is: Where do we draw the line? What kind of truth are we after?

\* \* \*

The book of Job asks: *Whence then comes wisdom? And where is the place of understanding? ... God understands the way of it and knows its place.*

\* \* \*

*And Jesus sat down and called the Twelve and said to them: Anyone who would be first must be last of all and servant of all.*

*And Jesus took a child, and put the child in the midst of them, and taking the child in his arms, Jesus said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives not me but the one who sent me."*

A child who has no argument to offer for position or power, whom calculative thinking would compute as powerless. To receive a child is to receive Christ.

And not only children but also those of equivalent stature to a child: the powerless, those who cannot repay or offer reward.

\* \* \*

There is a pastor [Walt Wangerin] of an inner-city Lutheran church. He tells of walking in the neighborhood near his church, a neighborhood in which the city's poor live and to which his church reaches out.

He passed by the house of one man named Robert, who lived alone, whom the church had helped on several occasions.

Robert dressed in clothes-closet clothes and wore them as if they were the finest

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new clothes, though they were worn and frayed. He carried himself with an affected regal bearing. And he always carried a walking cane which he tapped as he walked.

The pastor heard Robert's tapping behind him. Robert was a planet with its own atmosphere, which arrived before he did.

There was no avoiding him. Robert invited the reluctant pastor into his house. "You helped me when I needed it," Robert said, "and I want to give you something to show my gratitude."

Robert opened the cabinet under the sink and pulled out a box and, with a bold, sweeping gesture, opened it to reveal a box filled with what to most (the pastor included) would seem like junk – a trivet with one leg broken off and other discarded items that Robert had collected. To Robert, they were treasures.

"No. I couldn't take anything from you. We don't help people to be repaid. We do it for free to serve Christ." And, having declined the gift, the pastor left.

One Sunday morning, the pastor was preaching when the doors of the sanctuary opened, and there stood Robert – his hair combed up into twin peaks, like the towers of a cathedral. And he walked down the center aisle like a visiting dignitary and sat on the front pew.

As the preacher preached, Robert (unlike the Lutherans) moved to his own sermon, which had a much different rhythm than the one everyone else was hearing. And the preacher felt he was losing control.

At last, Robert stood up and said, "I am going to pray."

"Now is not the time to pray," the preacher said.

He finished the sermon and then came the offering. As the ushers took up the offering, the preacher stood in the center of the chancel with his head bowed. He looked up, expecting to see the ushers with the offering plates.

Instead, there stood Robert, the twin peaks of his hair towering over the preacher, and he said, "I'm not going to pray for you no more." And with that, he walked – tap-tap-tapping – down the center aisle and out of the church.

The next day, the preacher went to Robert's house and told him he would like to accept his gift. And it was, he said, a two-legged trivet that forgave him.

When he received the trivet (which the world would calculate to be broken), he received Robert (whom the world would calculate to be broken).

And when he received Robert, he received one who stood before him as a child, the very image of being powerless. And when he received the child-like Robert, he received Christ (whom the world broke on the cross). *This is my body broken for you.*

\* \* \*

The world would calculate the trivet as broken, Robert as worthless, and the woman as having fallen arches.

What kind of truth are we after?

Wisdom tells us that the place of understanding is the cross of Christ Jesus. And when we receive the powerless (those without capacity to reward or repay), we receive Christ.

And, in receiving Christ, we, fallen arches and all, walk in beauty.