

Wisdom and Foolishness

Isaiah 29: 13-16 1 Corinthians 1: 18-25

Wisdom and foolishness are somewhat clear to us, even though they may be difficult to define with precision. Some will see wisdom as foolishness and others will see the what was called foolishness as wisdom, but it doesn't happen that often. Most people seem to know the difference. However, that doesn't mean that they can't inhabit the same space.

Former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in 2002 was trying to explain why there was no evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq as the administration had claimed as the reason for going to war. He is a brilliant individual even if you have problems with how he uses that brilliance. He responded to reporter's question with this now-infamous statement:

Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones.

His brilliance shines in his ability to formulate such a statement on-the-fly which, when parsed closely, actually makes perfect sense. One might call that wisdom.

On the other hand, as an answer to a reporter's question, it is ridiculously obtuse way of saying something quite simple, like: 'we don't know the full story.' One might call that foolishness.

Part of the Epiphany season means reckoning with what God is doing in Jesus of Nazareth? What is God doing in the incarnation? In one sense, it is God's latest attempt to break through the inability of God's people to follow God's way. In another sense, it is an escalation of this confrontation with humanity, posing a very different way from what we are accustomed to.

For this week and next week, we will be dealing with texts that confront and challenge us to think and experience in very different ways from what we typically think and experience. In the process, we find things turned on their head, inside-out and upside-down.

The ways in which we think and experience life are fully conditioned by culture and its dominant themes. We live in a consumer culture which bombards us constantly with the message of getting, getting more, getting better, getting the best. We are told to value certain things and not to value others. Our consumer culture is laden with choice, and it seems there are always more choices. There was a time when you would get milk or skim milk. Now there are a dozen varieties of milk along with non-dairy products

which are also called milk. Choice is a primary value so that you can have what you prefer. Your preference is also a primary value, and you shouldn't have to compromise your value preference. If it costs more, then culture says that you deserve it because what matters to you is of primary value.

This worldly cultural value system gets imported into church life. This is where it gets problematic because what Jesus was all about, and indeed what God has always been about, is a wholly different value system. Systems of faith are typically founded on alternative value systems and therefore present counter-cultural values. Yet I know of few people today who go to church in the expectation of embracing a counter-cultural way of thinking. It would not be their preference, choice being a primary value, and getting what you want being alongside that value, and your happiness being a primary value there, too. This counter-cultural stuff would be far too disturbing and disruptive.

As I just noted, God has been at this for a long time. Scripture is always revealing this counter-cultural orientation if we are observant. The prophet Isaiah reflects God's issues with God's people who, as in every age, simply don't get it – not even close.

The prophets regularly chastise the people for their empty and meaningless worship that suits their values of checking off the religion line on their to-do- list, but not seriously valuing the values which God wants them to embrace in the daily living.

These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught.

God sees clearly that it is all show and no substance. The people who engage in worship practices think that they're nailing that religion thing and pleasing God. Instead, God is complaining that they're simply going through the motions, following rules and practices that have been made up by other people, not by God.

Therefore, once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.

God is going to try to teach God's people once again. God is ready to blow-up the standard practices. God is ready to skewer the learned wisdom of the wisest. God is ready to make the smart guys realize that they aren't so smart after all.

God might try telling us again that if you want to gain the most value, it doesn't occur by getting more; it occurs by giving more. The world cocks its head like Charley when I talk to him and thinks, 'That can't be right. That's crazy. That's foolishness.'

God might try telling us again that if you want to enjoy more, then you should have less. The world cocks its head like Charley and thinks, 'That can't be right. That's crazy. That's foolishness. I need all that stuff in the storage unit that I pay hundreds of dollars a month to keep, even though I haven't actually got much use for all of it.'

God addresses the smarty pants who have developed elaborate plans for their success, thinking God won't mind all of these schemes to benefit themselves.

Woe to those who go to great depths to hide their plans from the Lord, who do their work in darkness and think, "Who sees us? Who will know?"

Finally, the upside-down nature of what people do, compared to what God desires, gets seen from God's vantage point. God's people have substituted their own values while insisting that this is indeed what God values. Not so, comes the reply.

You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, "You did not make me"? Can the pot say to the potter, "You know nothing"?

Doing things in a way that values what God values seems confusing in the eyes of the world, seen not as wisdom but as foolishness. From God's perspective, the ways of the world are foolishness even though the world calls its promoters wise and its teaching of worldly value as wisdom.

The apostle Paul runs into this in dealing with the largely Gentile population in the church at Corinth. The ways of God that Paul had taught while he was with them have been eroded by other teachers who have come along and by these new believers simply living in the world. There is an inverted logic, a counter-cultural message to be valued.

Our faith has a key element in a crucified Savior. That's crazy; that's foolishness. How can the Savior of all be crucified? A savior isn't supposed to die, being executed like a criminal. A savior conquers evil and liberates the oppressed and downtrodden. A savior is mighty, even invincible. This Jesus dies on the cross in weakness; that's no savior, that's foolishness.

Paul opens this section: *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* Paul then quotes from our passage in Isaiah, and proceeds to ask rather rhetorically: *Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?*

God knew that no one would be led to God's ways and values by the wisdom of the world. The wisdom of the world suited the world's ways and values, being conformed and defined by the world. God's ways and values suited the Kingdom of God, being conformed and defined by God. The different systems are not only incompatible, they stand directly opposite each other as wisdom and as foolishness.

Paul will make what is a rather remarkable statement to those having a hard time understanding a crucified Savior. For believers, Paul says, *Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.*

How can that be? Paul understands that the powers of the world took their best shot, the one that always work – kill the threat. Crucifixion is one of the most brutal, drawn-out forms of capital punishment. By leaving the dead fixed on the cross, those crucified stood up as billboards for the worldly powers to remind the people of what happens to troublemakers. They could remain there for weeks, being torn apart by carrion, rotting in the sun – a very vivid reminder indeed.

The power of God is in the wisdom of emptying that worldly power of death of its usefulness. By the resurrection, the power of death is undone, and the worldly powers' best and most reliable weapon is rendered useless. Death is ended by life; God wins. God's wisdom and strength may appear to the world as foolishness and weakness, but instead it displays God's wisdom and strength over the worldly powers, God's sovereignty in bringing new life precisely where it isn't supposed to be possible.

The good news **is** a heaping helping of foolishness. The mere fact that we have a Savior who was crucified would have been affront enough. Yes, we have a Savior who was executed by the government. What kind of Savior is that? Taking up one's own cross and dying with Christ in order to serve him and his Kingdom? This is **not** a message that's going to ring true for many folks.

And this message doesn't play very well in today's society either. We love our Jesus, but that gospel is a bit much. Yet it is this gospel of good news foolishness that should be our singular focus. Instead, we're all about a multitude of distractions, doing what the world tells us, valuing what the world tells us to value. These distractions are so effective that we have emptied the gospel of its power to transform ourselves and our experience of life. Like the people in Isaiah, our faith experience is "based on merely human rules [we] have been taught." We have taken away the sharp edge of the gospel and turned it into harmless butter knife, a collection of interesting sayings and theological positions. We aren't transformed; we're massaged. Each one gets what they want and misses the point, dispensing with the foolishness and making it into something sensible and palatable to our tastes.

When the gospel ceases to be God's word of foolishness, we need to check again because we're separating ourselves from God's promise and new life in Jesus, our Lord and Savior. God's wisdom and strength are the source of new life, but to the world it is simply foolishness and weakness.