

Foolish Wisdom, Wise Fools

A man and God were having a conversation
And the man said, "For you, God, how fast does a million years go by?"
"Oh, it takes about a second," was God's reply.
"And how much is a million dollars worth to you?" Asked the man.
And God said, "Just about a penny or two."
"Well then," asked the man, "do you have a penny you could lend?"
"Well sure," said God, "Just a second."

"For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom,
And God's weakness is stronger than human strength."
These words from verse 25 of today's scripture passage
Convey a truth that is beyond doubt,
That God is different from us humans, wiser, stronger, bigger.
Many times when I have been frustrated and confused,
Wondering why tragedy strikes or injustice persists,
Why people seem to choose violence over peace,
These words have been a comfort to me.
It is reassuring to know that even as we fail to understand
Why things happen, that there is a greater wisdom
That sees what I cannot see, that knows what I cannot know.
However, this comfort in the existence of God is not unique to Christianity.
Surely being bigger, stronger, and wiser than humans
Is implied in the very concept of a God.
Even the pagan gods of Canaan, Greece, and Rome
Were understood to be superior beings to humans.
The superiority of God over humans was probably not at issue

In the Corinthian church.

Last week, I highlighted the main conflict Paul seeks to heal

With this first letter to the Corinthians.

There was division between those who said they were “of Paul,”

And those who claimed to be “of Apollos.”

I introduced the character of Apollos as a charismatic speaker,

A user of “wise words,” σοφία λόγου, or “clever language.”

Apollos was skilled in rhetoric, which was a style of speaking

And argumentation well-known around the Mediterranean

As the main way ideas were exchanged and debated.

Clever rhetoricians, engaging public speakers,

Were a source of both knowledge and entertainment

In a culture without mass media, and where many

Could neither read nor write.

Clearly Apollos was an engaging speaker,

But last week I pointed out Paul’s concern that

The Corinthian believers would be swayed by style over substance.

Part of the problem as Paul saw it was the potential

For individual leaders like Apollos to become the main attraction,

That the gospel of Jesus Christ might take a backseat

To the experience of hearing an entertaining speaker.

But as I mentioned last week, there is another issue.

Paul worried about the church adopting the values of society

Rather than the other way around.

After all, many religious and philosophical traditions

Had their famous rhetoricians and public speakers.

Paul didn’t want new believers to show up just to hear

Good preaching, but to hear true preaching,
Not just to be entertained, but to understand the unique
And powerful truth in the Gospel of Christ crucified.
So what is that unique and powerful truth?
Paul describes it as foolishness to those who are perishing,
But the power of God to those being saved.
In other words, the good news of Christ, our salvation,
Seems foolish to the society around us.
Not just that, but Christ in his victory over death and the cross
Has proved the superiority of God's wisdom
Over the supposed wisdom of the world.
In verse 20, Paul challenges the prominent voices of society.
"Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world?"
So what is this wisdom of the world that God has made foolish?
I could say that God made foolish the world's belief
That violence is the ultimate tool of victory
When Jesus defeated his execution and rose again,
His name glorified forever instead of the shame they sought to place on it.
I could say that God made foolish the world's belief
In the very structure of Empire, which depends on violence
And economic domination to survive and expand,
Giving believers an alternative to the Emperor and his ways.
I could say these things and I would be correct,
But as much as I like to think about the bigger picture,
Paul was writing to the Corinthians about problems within their church,
Not necessarily about the whole structure of society.
However, I would like to introduce you to two ideas

That perhaps help us understand how the two are connected,
How the same gospel of Christ crucified can transform us
On both the larger and smaller scale.

The first concept I want to introduce is one I call “social rank.”
This concept is that humans instinctively and culturally
Produce ways to determine who ranks above whom
In any given situation.

The markers of higher rank or status vary across cultures,
But some are fairly consistent.

Uniforms, for example, communicate our social rank.
Police uniforms immediately place officers at the top,
The ones who must be obeyed in any situation
And who ultimately have the ability to use force.

A janitor’s uniform, on the other hand, marks a person
As of lower rank, someone who serves those around them.

I’m sure you can quickly think of other status markers
That we notice and interpret to determine social rank.

My dad always wears a suit, or at least a tie,
Whenever he flies on an airplane.

He says he gets treated much better when he’s dressed nicely
Than if he wears more comfortable clothes.

I think that’s a great observation, because social rank
Is not about your actual inherent worth as a person,
It’s not about your goodness or gifts or godliness.

Social rank is not about you, it’s about how others treat you.

Or, more accurately, how others are allowed to treat you.

Think of the saying, “The customer is always right.”

That statement basically means that people in customer service
Have lower social rank than their customers.

Customers can complain, withhold tips, or make nasty comments,
And the waiter or cashier or salesperson
Is just supposed to absorb it and still serve their needs.

Because this concept is new and a bit abstract,
I want to open the floor for questions.

Is there anything you want to clarify about my concept of social rank?
Are there any examples of social ranking you want to share?
Or, maybe you all get it and we don't need more clarification.

Now that we understand social rank, I think we can start to notice
That Jesus was constantly preaching against social rank.
Or, more accurately, Jesus was constantly arguing for the reversal of social
rank, for elevating the lowly and humbling the powerful.

The last shall be first and the first shall be last.

Blessed are the meek.

Let the children come to me.

There is even one parable that is almost explicit about social rank.

In Luke 14, Jesus says,
“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down
at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has
been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come
and say to you, “Give this person your place”, and then in disgrace you
would start to take the lowest place.

But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher"; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

There are so many examples of Jesus preaching for reversal of social rank,
That we have language to describe a society where social ranking
Is determined by God's love rather than human wisdom.
We call it the kingdom of God, or the upside-down kingdom.
The established wisdom of the world is that social rank is everything,
And that we should constantly seek to elevate our own rank,
Even at the expense of others.

The world says to suck up to those above us,
And punch down at those below us.

The world says it is right and good and wise
That higher-status people should be treated better
And lower-status people should be treated worse.
But Jesus' message was about doing the opposite,
Humbling the exalted and exalting the humble,
Comforting the afflicted while afflicting the comfortable.
Jesus taught us to reverse what we've been taught,
And to see everyone as equally loved by God,
And worthy of kindness, compassion, and salvation.

Can you think of other examples of Jesus
Preaching the reversal of social rank?
I'll give us a couple minutes to share...

The world saw Jesus' upside-down kingdom as foolishness,
Then when its leaders were forced to take it seriously,
They saw it as a threat.
They tried to make Jesus the lowest status person on earth.
A crucified person was an object of shame and ridicule.
They hung there, naked and exposed, their suffering on display
To show that they deserved to be treated this way.
People were expected to heap insults on them,
To make jokes and be entertained by their suffering.
The Romans and Jewish authorities put Jesus in that position,
The position of zero social status.
It would be foolish, they thought, for anyone to follow him now.
It would be foolish for anyone to glorify Jesus
When he was subject to so much shame.
So when Jesus rose again, when he was glorified by God,
And taken up to heaven to sit at God's right hand,
It was as if God had used what the world thought as foolish
To reverse the shame onto those who thought themselves wise.
God used the weakness of Jesus on the cross
To shame those who the world saw as strong.
That's the powerful truth at the core of Jesus' message,
The truth that Paul worried might be lost in fancy rhetoric.
As the Corinthians elevated Apollos according to the worldly value
Of being a skilled public speaker, Paul worried that
The Corinthians would simply continue to reproduce
The values and markings of social rank in the society around them,
And not see the way Christ's message of reversal

Was supposed to shape their relationships with each other.
“Consider your own call,” Paul says to his brothers and sisters in Corinth,
“Not many of you were wise by human standards,
Not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.”
In other words, Paul reminds the Corinthians that they were not called
According to social rank, but by openness to the Gospel.
The early church was a revolutionary idea,
A place where a slave could sit next to a wealthy merchant,
Where a Gentile could break bread with Jews,
Where the social ranking of society was cast out the window,
And all could partake equally in the Lord’s Supper,
In the body and blood of Christ.
It’s this special bubble of Christ’s upside-down kingdom
Inside, but separate from the rest of society,
That Paul desperately wants the Corinthians to preserve.
Paul wants to preserve this bubble, first in faithfulness to Christ,
Secondly for the benefit of the believers,
And finally because Paul rightly saw Jesus’ attack on social ranking
To be key for unlocking the salvation of all people.
Here is where I want to introduce my other abstract concept.
One of the most difficult parts of preaching, and of following Jesus
Is trying to see and maintain the connection between the big picture,
The structures and injustices and violence of society,
And the small picture, our own lives in community with each other.
We can create our own bubble of upside-down social rank,
But how does that solve the world’s problems?
We can protest and organize and serve the poor,

But does that heal the divisions and wounds among us?
I believe that the same Gospel, the same good news of Jesus
And his victory over the power and wisdom of the world,
Can save us on both bigger and smaller levels.
So here I want to introduce the concept of a fractal.
Many of you already know what a fractal is,
And some probably understand the math behind them better than I do,
But I'll do my best to explain it with my visual aid here.
Basically a fractal is a shape that infinitely repeats,
So that any small piece of it is identical to the larger whole.
[demonstration with triangles]

So we can imagine the upside-down kingdom as a sort of fractal.
The idea is that as we create communities on a small scale
According to Jesus' teachings, we start to change the bigger picture.
We dream of a day when the love and community of equal status,
The connection and social leveling we find in Communion, in footwashing,
Will be reflected in structures of justice and abundance for all people.
The early church began as a kind of social experiment,
And the reversal of social rank that Jesus preached
Created communities that were attractive to many people
At all levels of society, but especially to those at the bottom.
But sadly, that reversal of social rank,
The rejection of the world's status markers,
The commitment to treat people of all social ranks with love,
That beating heart of Jesus' gospel was one of the first things
To disappear as Christianity transformed from small groups of believers

Into religious institutions and hierarchies,
And eventually into the religion of the state.
Social rank is extremely persistent and difficult to reverse,
Even for those of us who try to follow Jesus.
But as Paul reminds us, it is God's wisdom, God's strength
Rather than ours that makes the difference.
We will try our best to make this church a community
That rejects worldly status markers like wealth, work, and education
That treats as foolish concepts like citizenship, race, and class.
We will make our church family in the image of Christ,
Following Jesus by building peace and solidarity
among ourselves and our neighbors, as our Vision states.
We may not transform the whole world,
But we have faith that God is working for that transformation
On a global scale and on the scale of this congregation.
And when our Vision Statement feels like a true statement
Of who we are as a church family,
We will do as Paul said and boast in the Lord,
Whose wisdom is the only kind that matters.
Amen.