***TEMPTED TO BE WISER THAN WE ARE***

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Texts: Proverbs 3:5-8 and 1 Corinthians 1:17-31

*Do not be wise in your own eyes.* That is the advice of the biblical proverb and perhaps also the warning offered by your grandmother who knew a little something about wisdom. The proverb does not say, *Do not be wise*. That would be foolish, for wisdom is a good thing, something highly valued, something worth gaining. The prologue to the book of Proverbs suggests that the whole book is written:

*for learning about wisdom and instruction,*

*for understanding words of insight,*

*for gaining instruction in wise dealing,*

*righteousness, justice, and equity.*

Wisdom embraces those treasured values – insight, righteousness, justice and equity. It is less about learning facts than practicing discernment. As David Brooks suggests in his book *The Road to Character*:

*Wisdom isn’t a body of information. It’s the moral quality of knowing what you don’t know and figuring out a way to handle your ignorance, uncertainty, and limitation.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Those who are *wise in their own eyes* may not recognize their own “ignorance, uncertainty, and limitation,” but it is not easily hidden. “Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt,” said Abraham Lincoln, which might be my cue to sit down and shut up. But at the risk of playing the fool, I will press on, trusting that the Holy Spirit can proclaim the gospel even through the mouth of a fool!

“Fools despise wisdom and instruction,” says another proverb. The fool doesn’t need to listen to others, consider diverse viewpoints, or understand the facts; his own assessment is all he needs. She despises the wisdom of others and needs no instruction because she already knows it all. She may claim humility as a personal virtue, but it is belied by the absolute certainty of her own opinion. “Do not be wise in your own eyes” begins the proverb, which then concludes: “fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.” The proverb seems to suggest that those who are wise in their own eyes regard God with very little awe. Being impressed with their own wisdom they have no need for God; they have their own sources, rely upon their own clever insights, and end up doing what is evil in God’s eyes. “Trust the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight,” says another proverb. The wisdom commended in Proverbs is not the wisdom of talk radio or the pundits on TV; it is the wisdom that flows from God, wisdom revealed in the pages of Scripture, wisdom that fools readily reject.

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul recognizes that the question of what is wise and what is foolish is central to the message of the cross. In the 1st century the cross was the ultimate sign of death and suffering, akin to a noose hanging from gallows today; yet for Christians the cross had become a sign of new life and sacrificial love as God turned the wisdom of the world upside down. Far from being a footnote in Jesus’ story of salvation, the cross was central to the good news Paul proclaimed.

In his book*, The Day the Revolution Began*, Tom Wright tells of a Roman Catholic archbishop who told of three mischievous young lads who decided to play a trick on the priest who was hearing confessions in their local church.

*They took turns going into the confessional and ‘confessing’ all sorts of terrible sins and crimes to see how the priest would react. Two of them then made off in a hurry; but the priest stopped the third one and, as though taking him seriously, announced that he was going to impose a penance on him. The lad was to walk up to the far end of the church, toward the figure of Jesus hanging on the cross. He was to look Jesus in the face and to say three times, ‘You did all that for me, and I don’t give that much’ – snapping his fingers on the ‘that.’ The young man did it once. He did it a second time. Then he found he couldn’t do it the third time, but instead dissolved into tears. He left the church a changed person. ‘And the reason I know that story,’ concluded the archbishop, ‘is that I was that young man.’”[[2]](#endnote-2)*

We gather for worship each week at the foot of a cross that is empty of the crucified body of Christ. Walking up this aisle, looking at the cross, and snapping our fingers as that young lad did does not confront us with the agony of crucifixion. The cross is empty of the tortured figure of Christ. It is empty because our ancestors in faith rejected any attempt to make a representation of Jesus into an idol. It is empty as a sign that Jesus is risen from the cross to new life. It is empty because the cross has been emptied of its power by Jesus’ resurrection. But we risk that cross becoming a mere adornment to the walls of this sanctuary if we do not recall that the cross was the place where Jesus suffered and died for us, the empty attempt of the authorities to silence the good news Jesus proclaimed, a sign of suffering transformed into a sign of hope.

The world deemed it foolish to believe that the cross could be such a sign. But what seems foolish to the world is wise in God’s eyes. Conversely what is wise in the world’s eyes is often decreed by God to be foolish. We live in a world that proclaims a lot of foolish wisdom:

a world that declares wealth to be the measure of human value,

a world that sees violence and pornography as forms of entertainment,

a world that protects guns more zealously than it does their victims,

a world that declares meekness to be weakness,

a world that exalts beauty that is transient and only skin deep,

a world that declares “God helps them who help themselves” and denies any responsibility for one’s neighbor,

a world that spends more for weapons it will never use than for food for those who have nothing to eat,

a world that calls the way of Jesus unrealistic and foolish.

The first century world echoed much of that same wisdom. Jesus was taunted as “King of the Jews” as he was being crucified. He was declared weak and was mocked on the cross as powerless to save himself. The world thought it foolish that he chose as disciples lowly fishermen, despised tax collectors, and those who had been cast aside by society. His plan was hardly the blueprint for beginning a movement that would endure! Yet here we are, two thousand years later, listening to his words, recalling his sacrifice and proclaiming his resurrection half a world away from where it happened!

We still struggle to accept what Jesus teaches as wisdom to guide our lives rather than foolish dreams that are unrealistic. We wrestle with how to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. We resist turning the other cheek. We find it hard to strike a balance between trusting God wholeheartedly and putting our trust in more tangible things. When Jesus is delivering the Sermon on the Mount and ticks off his list of those who are blessed –

the poor in spirit

those who mourn

the meek

those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

the merciful

the pure in heart

the peacemakers

those persecuted for righteousness’ sake

those reviled falsely on his account -

we don’t dream of joining that list. It hardly sounds like a blessed group and by the world’s wisdom it is not. But the world’s wisdom is not God’s wisdom, and Jesus says that they are blessed – blessed to be called children of God and to inherit the earth; blessed to be comforted, to receive mercy and to see God; blessed to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. We struggle to accept and live into those words; those who try – the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, the pure in heart – are often called naïve or foolish by the world. But Jesus calls them blessed!

The message of the cross is such a blessing despite the pain and agony that are part of its story, a message that seems foolish to the world, but is good news for us who believe it. Robert Schuller of Crystal Cathedral fame once suggested, “Let’s turn the cross into a plus.” Really! Then we could gather ‘round and sing: *Beneath the Plus of Jesus*! and *Lift High the Plus!* Such a rebranding diminishes the suffering which is an essential part of the story and is neither faithful nor wise, for the cross is not a rosy symbol of positive thinking; it is a sign of suffering that has become for us a sign of salvation and the two are entwined – forever entwined in the story of the crucified and risen Lord. That is the wisdom we proclaim here at the foot of this cross and at this table where we break bread and share a cup in remembrance of him. It is the good news we share with a world in need of hope and peace and wisdom which is God’s wisdom. It is the wisdom of God for the people of God – for you, for me, and for the world. Amen

1. David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, Random House: New York, 2015, p.9 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. N.T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began*, HarperOne: 2016, pp.11-12 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)