***WHERE IS THE ONE WHO IS WISE?***

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Texts: 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5 and Matthew 5:10-12

This past week the governors of Texas and Mississippi lifted all restrictions in their states related to the coronavirus. No longer are there limitations on the size of gatherings indoors or outdoors; no longer are there mask mandates. People can once again crowd into bars and restaurants, church sanctuaries and basketball arenas, gyms and convenience stores and breathe all over one another without the inconvenience of wearing a mask or social distancing or isolating with the virus. In the words of the governor of Texas sent via Twitter: OPEN 100%. EVERYTHING. Notably, these decisions were made without consultation with their own state health departments and come despite Texas being 49th and Mississippi 47th among the 50 states in vaccination rates. They come as new coronavirus cases are holding steady at 67,000 per day across the country, with the number of COVID deaths having surpassed 500,000, and with growing concern for new highly transmissible variants. “I just feel like its time to get back to somewhat of a normal life,” said one Texan.[[1]](#endnote-1) I hope that someone got that message to the virus, because to this point in time the virus does not seem to care much about our desire for a quick return to normalcy!

“*Where is the one who is wise?*” asks Paul. It is a question that a lot of folks are asking these days. Who are the voices we can trust to give us good advice, tell us the truth, and make wise decisions about the virus or the economy or anything else? There was a time when Walter Cronkite was described as “the most trusted voice in America”, but I doubt there is any such trusted voice out there today, though there are a host of voices that are not hesitant to offer their opinions. In the words of the Greek philosopher Plato:

*Wise men speak because they have something to say;*

*fools because they have to say something.”*

Abraham Lincoln put it more bluntly: “*Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt*.” Yet we have plenty of pundits willing to offer their opinions on just about any topic and lots of folks anxious to share their views on social media, be they informed or uninformed. The one who is wise knows what she knows and what she doesn’t know, when to speak and when to remain silent, how to speak the truth and how to speak the truth in love.

Paul was writing to a church in the city of Corinth where wisdom was a great virtue, logic highly valued, and debate a public sport. Young Christians in that Corinthian community were struggling to defend their belief in the saving power of Jesus’ death and resurrection, what Paul calls “the message about the cross.” Non-believers found it total foolishness. Perhaps that should not be surprising, for it is not the most rational of rational arguments to say that we are saved by the death of an itinerant preacher and healer who was crucified as a criminal by Rome and rose from the dead, something no one else in human history has done. And by the way, he was and is the Son of God and Messiah of God! That message about the cross, not just the facts about what happened but also the meaning of those events for our salvation, defies logic and human wisdom. Yet we proclaim it as gospel, good news for the world and for us who believe.

You cannot reason your way to salvation in Christ! Fundamentally the message of the cross is not a reasoned human message, but a divine act through which we hold hope for our salvation. As Paul says:

*My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.*

Our faith is grounded, not in the logic of crucifixion and resurrection, but in the reality of those acts of God in bringing about salvation for the world. Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard calls it “a leap of faith.” It is the difference between believing that someone can push a wheelbarrow across a tightrope stretched across the Grand Canyon and getting in the wheelbarrow. It is admitting that faith is always something of a mystery because it is invested in a God who is beyond our full comprehension. That is not to say that our faith is random or indefensible. There are rational arguments to be made in support of our Christian faith, but reason alone cannot inspire faith. That inspiration is God’s work through the Holy Spirit.

The cross is the stark symbol of that challenge. It was an instrument of torture and death, a means by which Rome not only silenced its critics and quelled threats but also intimidated the general population. Crucifixion was a very public execution that extended suffering across hours while passersby took their turns mocking or weeping or cringing in horror. Yet here we are, gathered at the foot of the cross, be it literally or virtually, in a building whose spire is topped by a cross for all the world to see. The symbol of the cross has been reappropriated and reinterpreted by Christians from signifying pain, intimidation, and humiliation to representing faith, hope, and love for a community of believers. As Union Presbyterian Seminary president Brian Blount rightly notes:

*As surely as the McDonald’s arches signal the site of burgers and fries, so the cross signals the location of a Christian community or a Christian believer.*[[2]](#endnote-2)

You can’t get any more iconic than that!

Like the golden arches, that symbol is global. Some years ago, David Dobler who was Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church at the time was walking through one of the Christian areas in Sudan. He noticed that many of the thatched huts had symbols of their tribe on top, but he was surprised to see that one of the huts had a crude and simple cross on the roof. He was glad to see it and stopped to ask the resident of that hut, “What tribe are you with?” The man replied quietly, “I am with the tribe of Jesus.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

We too belong to that tribe; the cross marks us as members of the tribe of Jesus, a tribe that is greater than all other tribes to which we belong, a tribe that transcends differences of geography and language, ethnicity and race, gender and sexual orientation, age and economic circumstance, denomination and political affiliation. We may not mark the tops of our homes with the sign of that tribe, but we do mark this house of worship with the sign of the cross that declares to the world: we are followers of Jesus! In your homes some of you have art that depicts the cross in some way, some of you have bumper stickers on your cars with a symbol of the cross, some of you wear a cross around your neck, and some have a cross tattooed somewhere in affirmation of that Christian tribe to whom you belong. We belong to the tribe of Jesus for our fundamental identity is in our common calling to be disciples of the crucified and risen Christ. We are kinfolk – one tribe, one family – united not by our blood but by the blood of Christ shed for us on the cross around which we gather.

At this table we come to share a cup as Jesus told is to do, recalling his words: “This is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” Every time we gather here, we recall that foolish message of the cross – his death and resurrection – that is for us a message of hope and salvation. What the Romans and Jewish leaders intended to be an ignominious end for the Jesus movement has become for us a new beginning toward a hope-filled end in the Kingdom of Heaven. In her book *The Undoing of Death,* Fleming Rutledge describes it this way:

*Winston Churchill said to the British people in 1942, ‘This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.’ Expanding his words, we may rightly say that the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ is truly the beginning of the End, when the kingdom of God will be all in all.[[4]](#endnote-4)*

That is what we celebrate at this table: not the end of Jesus’ life but the beginning of our life in him, the beginning of the End when the kingdom of God will be all in all and we will all sit at that heavenly banquet table together. Here we celebrate the promise of salvation from sin and death through Jesus’ death and resurrection. To the world it makes no sense; it is just plain foolishness. But to us who believe, it is divine foolishness that is wiser than any human wisdom. It is the wisdom of God for the people of God recalled in these gifts of God given for you and for me! So take and eat. Take and Drink. Take and remember – the cross, the empty tomb, the body and blood of Jesus the Christ given for you. Amen

1. “Mix of fear, joy as masks come off in Texas, Miss.” Brittany Shammas, William Wan, Sarah Fowler and Eva Ruth Moravec, *The Washington Post*, March 4, 2021, p.1 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Brian K. Blount, *Invasion of the Dead: Preaching Resurrection*, Westminster John Knox Press:2014, p.xii [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Marj Carpenter in *Monday Morning*, Feb. 1, 1999, Vol.64, No.3, p.1 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Fleming Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death*, William B. Eerdmans: 2002, p.45 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)