

Marquand Chapel
Tuesday, September 13, 2005

Who has Wisdom?
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In the name of God, who chooses what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. Amen.

Here's a hard passage to read from a Yale pulpit: Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of the God, the world did not know God through wisdom.

Today's text is difficult to understand without reading the chapter that comes before it. In the first chapter of the letter, Paul delivers a witheringly sarcastic indictment of human wisdom, of the wisdom of the world. He says that God has made foolish even the most discerning of us, the wisest, the smartest and most articulate. Unaided by God, Paul says, we simply cannot learn enough, read enough, think hard enough to know the only thing that matters. Through wisdom, Paul says, we cannot know God.

In saying this, Paul adds to a thread of the Biblical witness that is very skeptical of human wisdom, of our capacity as created beings to know much of anything that really counts. When Job asks God to account for his suffering, God suggests that no human person could ever fathom the plans and intentions of the Lord who creates and destroys.

In addition to warning us that human knowledge isn't worth much, these voices in the cannon often suggest that wisdom is worse than just petty and inconsequential. The wisdom of the world, we're told, can be seductive and dangerous. The serpent tempts Adam and Eve with the offer of knowledge. The hero of the exodus is Moses, who is slow of speech and tongue and not his fast-talking brother. And the Proverbs warn us to be particularly wary of wisdom couched in elegant rhetoric, in powerful and persuasive words. We are not to be seduced by the charms of those whose lips drip honey, whose speech is smoother than oil.

So when Paul brags in today's text that he has not come to the Corinthians proclaiming the Gospel in lofty words or in wisdom, he is drawing on a long Biblical tradition and one that we should not ignore. Paul seems to be saying if we rely on the wisdom of this age, on what we can learn on our own whether it is from books or from lectures or from each other, we are doomed to perish.

What are we to make of this in an academic community? Certainly the wisdom of the world that Paul and the Old Testament writers are talking about doesn't correlate exactly with what we learn in class every day. But this still isn't a glib question. If God has made foolish the wisdom of the world, if the world has not known God through wisdom, then what are we up to?

I don't think that Paul is saying that education, particularly theological education, is a useless endeavor. Many faithful Christians believe that the rules for life are laid out so clearly in scripture that a desire for further education is at best a waste of time and at worst evidence of a lack of faith. Sometimes these Christians are responding to the urgency of the Gospel but sometimes too this belief can be an excuse for a kind of intellectual laziness and a deeply objectionable pride in ignorance that deprives the church of the accountability and fresh ideas that good scholarship can offer.

However, I do think that academic life, particularly academic life at Yale, should raise serious questions for Christians. I promised at my baptism to pursue justice and peace. Therefore, I should have a very good reason for the fact that I'm planning on spending all day tomorrow with my feet up reading a book written by a German guy who can go on for four pages without using a verb. I should be able to explain to all those who are joined at the Eucharist table with me - persecuted Christians in the Sudan, sex workers in Thailand, those who lost everything in Hurricane Katrina, and the homeless and hungry in New Haven - I should be able to explain to them why the eight hours I'm going to spend reading tomorrow will bring the reign of God closer.

Moreover, academic life should raise questions for us when it separates us from other parts of the Body of Christ. For those of us who came from conservative communities, what does it mean when we no longer read scripture or understand God's work in the world in the same way as our parents, our aunts and uncles, the church communities that loved and raised us? Is it ever appropriate for any of us to say that another Christian community reads scripture differently because they just don't know as much as we do?

Academic life should raise serious questions for Christians. But I do think that today's text offers us something as we struggle to be faithful Christians while in divinity school. According to this text, the reason that Paul joins the old testament voices that dismiss human wisdom, the reason that Paul resolved to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified is that the crucifixion of Jesus was an event so momentous that it changed absolutely everything, even the way that we know. The New Testament scholar J. Louis Martyn tells us that Paul thought a new epistemology was needed after the cross. A God who went to the cross was so deeply foolish according to human wisdom, such a challenge to how we understood holiness and power and love and redemption that the old categories had to be discarded and words couldn't even mean the same thing anymore. The old wisdom, the wisdom of Athens and even the wisdom of Jerusalem, wasn't sinful or distracting. It just didn't matter. The wisdom of this world, human wisdom, was replaced by the wisdom of the cross.

And so the apostle who in the old wisdom would have been counted foolish because he was weak and fearful resolved to know only Christ and him crucified. And in this text he calls the Corinthians to leave behind the wisdom of the world and seek what he calls God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.

In today's text, Paul sets about contrasting the old wisdom with the new, the wisdom of the world with the wisdom of God. In his words we might be able to discern something about an academic life that is shaped by not by the wisdom of this world but by the wisdom of the cross.

Paul says that if he had spoken with eloquence and rhetorical flourish, the Corinthians might have been convinced of the truth of the Gospel by him rather than by the power of God. Words of human wisdom, Paul seems to be saying, point to the person who speaks them. However, the wisdom of Christ crucified points to God. Perhaps then the wisdom of the cross calls us to a spiritual discipline of acknowledging as we read and write the God who stands behind the richness and complexity of the texts and traditions and theologies that we study. If we resolve to know only Christ and him crucified, perhaps we should approach our work with humility and prayerfulness and the intention to point at all times to our dependence on God.

Paul also reminds us that the wisdom of the cross is sought in the context of the body of Christ. His entire discussion of wisdom is in service of his plea to the Corinthians to overcome their divisions and live as one people in the world. Perhaps Paul is concerned that some in Corinth are making claims to special knowledge or sophistication, that they are claiming to be closer to God by virtue of their learning. Paul is having none of this. However we are to organize ourselves as the Body of Christ, it is not according to how wise we are by the standards of other people. As we go out into the world with a diploma in Latin, the wisdom of the cross calls us to remember that while a Yale degree may afford us particular dignity and status in human institutions, it will not be so in the Kingdom of God and it ought not be so among God's people.

The fact that the wisdom of the cross is wisdom in community also means that our pursuit of wisdom must not be only for our own benefit. It seems important to find a way for our time here to serve a world that is in great need. This doesn't necessarily mean that knowledge is worthwhile only if it is immediately practical and applicable, just that we ought to learn with one eye on equipping ourselves to meet the needs of others.

Finally, the wisdom of the cross bears the mark of God who is at work in the world in a particular way; God who showed his strength by becoming weak, God who defeated death by dying. Paul says that we should remember that this is the God who chooses to work through what is low and despised in the world, who uses the weak to shame the strong. This suggests that wisdom is not the sole purview of those who appear to be in possession of it. I don't think that Paul is suggesting that you can learn everything you need to know in kindergarten or by looking at sunsets and petting puppies. Rather, it is that wisdom is often the particular possession of those who might not seem wise by human standards, of those whom the world despises, of the weak, of the old, of the poor, of those who are without power and prestige.

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Of what use is human wisdom?

If we truly desire to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified, if we truly desire the wisdom of the cross, we should know that it must be sought not among the powerful but among those who have through lives of quiet faithfulness lived at the foot of the cross and gained its wisdom.

Amen.

Benediction:

May you resolve to know only Jesus Christ and Him crucified. May you know that this is wisdom enough. Amen.