

“FROM DEATH TO LIFE: From Wisdom to Foolishness”

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Have you heard this definition of insanity? “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” I’ve heard that from various folks over the years and always found it interesting. When I looked it up this week I found that it’s a quote from Albert Einstein – I didn’t know that! Certainly adds some merit to have a genius say it! “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results” – which is not at all, of course, meant to caricature or over-simplify the difficult struggles of mental illness. What that quote is really getting at is a broad human tendency to not learn from experience – or at least to selectively ignore experience or reality when we do not want to listen. We can often do the same things over and over without a satisfying outcome – it’s a dead-end – but rather than changing what we do (which may require effort or creativity or risk), we simply wish the outcome will somehow change – trapped in futility.

But I’m not so sure...“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results”? Well, what about persistence? What about the value we give to trying again and again despite setbacks and failures? Some things you DO have to try again to get it right or make it work...what about that? Sometimes getting the result we want does depend on persistence, and there is no insanity in that – there is commitment and endurance and determination.

There are all sorts of situations in life you could put to those ideas to try to sort through the dead-end of futile repetition or the power of persistence. But I’ve been thinking of the particular perspective this could bring to faith – what dead-ends of repetition or empowerment of persistence might there be as we think about a relationship with God, about a faithful life? I’m not sure if

that makes sense to you right now or not, but let me try to show you what I mean...

For instance – try this way of looking at the 10 Commandments – what if we think the 10 Commandments are addressing simply how to make life work in the best way? And then the flip side of that would be to think of a negative human tendency that the commandments address as well. Here's what I mean: here's a different version of the 10 commandments:

- Find a god that works well for you – that is, change your god as needed
- Make god a size and shape that is convenient and manageable for you
- Invoke your god on your side against others
- Work – play – repeat (*you might notice that worship is not included there*)
- Manage your father and your mother
- Harm those who harm you
- Fidelity is optional
- Get all that you can and & keep all you can
- Say whatever best serves you
- Measure your worth in comparison to what others have

How does that sound to you? Can you see the kind of shadow cultural commandment on the flip side of each divine commandment? I think it's an interesting way to hear things, but I'm also concerned it might sound simplistic or moralistic in some way – our superior faithful look at what you and I of course wouldn't do, as we judge the corrupted ways of the culture out there?

No – what we very much need to see is our complicity in those shadow commands – to see our own choices and beliefs present there; AND to understand the very powerful attraction they have – we could say “oh that’s not what we’re supposed to do – that is bad”...but their attraction is that those things seem to work pretty well: your god on your side and you doing what you need to for you – that turns out pretty well sometimes. Which is the subtle deception of it all – the insidiousness of those shadow commands: it works for a while...but it never lasts; it works for some...but cannot work for all; it works for gods...but not for God. It is a kind of personal and group insanity – following again and again the path of co-opting God and serving self in life – even though the truth is it always falls apart in the end (or beginning or middle)...but let’s try again.

Which makes the actual 10 Commandments, by contrast, a study in persistence. They express the belief that to stay to these commitments to God and others and self – is to embrace the substance of true relationship and community with God and one another. It is to believe... sometimes, or often, despite results and appearances... that these are the ways of life.

I hope that makes some sense – the subtle futility, insanity, really, of those shadow ways in which we participate; and the subtle reality of faith, of persistence – of holding to the ways of life in the midst of all appearances. And with that in our minds and hearts, I want to turn to the Epistle lesson, and try to take that idea further – as the words of Paul there really insist that we do. And what I mean by taking the idea further is this: it is one thing to take the 10 Commandments and contrast them with some shadow commands – things that are clearly very tempting for us and others, but also clearly not right; we may try to disguise them as necessary or inevitable choices, yet we can also unmask them and see the futility for self and others and faith.

But what about things that are good? Things that are well-intentioned – that are noble, but that are not particularly Christian? That is, if I were to try to both unpack and summarize what Paul is getting at in the passage we heard today: how about all of human wisdom and spirituality? All of human knowledge and piety? Is that a broad enough ‘all of’ for you? All the insights of the philosophers and the guidance of the sages. Because that is what Paul is speaking to as he expansively addresses the entire wisdom of the world – Paul is not one to understate himself. Expansive, and antagonistic: destroying and making foolish such wisdom and piety, he says – and so it would seem the Jews and Greeks are dispensed with, and all other knowledge and spirituality to boot. Really? So when I quoted Albert Einstein to start this sermon, did you do a quick mental check: ‘is he a Christian, so is his wisdom OK?’? When you find a spiritual resonance in life, do you quick make sure it’s Christian so it’s OK? I don’t think that’s what we do – or what we have to or should do – so what do we make of what Paul is saying here?

Well – let’s be clear: Paul is never one to back away from speaking expansively, and he isn’t shy either about speaking antagonistically – and he had his time and context and reasons for that. But the core of what this is all about is the mystery of the incarnation and the scandal of the cross. What Paul is expressing is that in Jesus Christ, God does something beyond human wisdom to devise; what we find in the life of Jesus, in the crucifixion of Christ, in fact scandalizes our expectations of God. I hope that you find ‘scandal’ to be an interesting, or even odd, word for me to be using. It’s a word or idea that the theologian Rene Girard likes to use and which I find quite intriguing; scandal may for us call to mind tabloid headlines and shocking revelations – well, with God the tabloid headline is a different sort of shocking revelation: Jesus Christ. Just as a scandal forces us to rethink our

views of a person, the incarnation of Christ forces us to rethink what we know about God and even about ourselves. Because in the person of Jesus, God fully embraces humanity; and on the cross, Jesus crucified, God embraces, takes into God's self, all sin and suffering and death. Scandalous!

Scandalous? Likely for everyone here or listening today, that's not the first time you've heard that, so I wonder if the scandal of it becomes lost on us.

But if you do not believe in God, this story of Jesus does not make sense – you may be a good person, or very wise, but this revelation does not ring true or compelling; or you may be a pretty bad person, and you have no use for such foolishness; or you may just not care – that describes a lot of people in our world. If you believe in God differently, this story of Jesus does not make sense, and might even offend you – you may be a very good follower of God, but it does not ring true; or maybe your religion isn't so helpful but it's what you stick with anyway; or perhaps you are just taught faith differently – that describes a lot of people in our world too.

Ours is a world like Paul's, but different too – so what do we do in our day with this foolish wisdom of our faith in Christ, this scandalous truth? What do we do as Christians? Well, that is the connection back to insanity or persistence, to futility or faith – do you remember how we started there?! Because the core for us is simply that God in Christ has freed us from the futility of endlessly pleasing and appeasing God – freed us from calculating how we are accepted by God and who is accepted by God. For us as Christians, 'for we who believe', as Paul says, this is our salvation, our freedom, our truth – but it is a faith we confess with humility because we know too well the insanity of so-called Christian faith that has cultivated the very sin, suffering and death Christ overcame; in our time our faith is the

persistence to hold and be held by the presence of God with us – the truth of God in Christ speaking life to us over death.

And what do we do with such a truth? Well, a couple of things. One is – voila! – the 10 Commandments! – which Jesus summarized in this way: love God and love your neighbor. The freedom of faith in Christ, the truth of the cross, is the presence of God in all things – which is the freedom and persistence to give your life to love – the persistence and insistence that following the ways of life is to be Christ's presence in the world. That's what we do, who we are, in Christ.

And what we can also do is to meet the wisdom and faith in the world around us with gratitude – because ours is the foolish wisdom that God in Christ has embraced this world in saving grace; the foolish faith that God has freed us to the persistence of love; the foolish wisdom that God is at work in those around us. And it is faith foolish enough, too, to face boldly the futility of this broken world – faith that frees us from fear or despair to be witnesses to the victory of life. Speaking grace to truth, and life to death, and love to all... Insanity? No; Scandalous; Foolish; Faithful? Yes!

AMEN.