

The Folly of Wisdom  
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20:29

Let us pray. Holy One, guide our hearts towards compassion, and guide our minds towards understanding. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts and minds together be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer, through Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

In September of 2008, on a tiny strip of land in Alaska known as Gravina Island, workers put down their shovels, and parked their steamrollers for the last time. The road was completed. And this was not just any road. The road now known as Gravina Island Highway was nearly thirty years in the making—research began in the 1980s, the intention being to connect the nearby town of Ketchikan with the airport located on the island, about a mile and a half away, thus eliminating the need for a ferry service that carried some 350,000 people every year. The completed road—3.2 miles long—started at the airport and was destined to be connected to the Gravina Island Bridge.

Except, herein lies the rub. If you go visit the road today, you'll start at the airport and, 3.2 miles later, you'll wind up in a dead-end cul-de-sac. The bridge, which was to cost a whopping \$398 million, was never approved of by Congress, and so the project has been indefinitely shelved. But here's the real kicker—the powers-that-be in Alaska knew before the road was begun that the bridge would never be constructed. But they also knew that the money that had been earmarked for the road would have gone back to the federal government if not spent on this particular road. So the decision was made to build this meaningless stretch of pavement, which has since been appropriately dubbed by media as "The Road to Nowhere." The Road to Nowhere received massive media attention upon its completion in 2008; they blamed its construction on the person in power who could have stopped it, but chose not to. (As an aside, you may remember that Alaska as a whole was making lots of headlines in 2008, and we could play the game of three guesses who, but it would probably only take one for most of you to come up with the name of a certain Alaskan governor who was gaining notoriety around that time, the same woman who also blessed the construction of the Road to Nowhere.)

This wonderful little blast from the past brings us to our Lectionary text this morning, which takes a close look at the concept of wisdom when building upon a foundation. To understand what Paul is talking about, let us first take a little journey back in time to Corinth, to the community to whom Paul wrote these words. The city of Corinth, you may remember, was a bustling hub of activity in Paul's day. It was a very, very wealthy city for its time, its opulence based on the trade of artisans' products, specifically bronze and pottery. Corinth prided itself on religious diversity; archaeologists have noted that both Greek and Egyptian shrines co-existed there peacefully, and even the Jews found a place of acceptance in its limits, which was markedly unusual for that time period in the Roman Empire. However, the picture was hardly all sunshine and roses. The vast wealth of the culture was often created at the expense of the poorer districts of the city, and the poor suffered terribly there. It was in this community that Paul made inroads, and began the church—oftentimes even today, the Christian church finds willing ears among the poor, the oppressed, the hurting; those who need to hear good news. The church in Corinth was no different: it had some wealthy patrons, but it was mostly made up of the poorer class. Racially it was more varied; the names mentioned in the letters show that there were those with Greek, Latin, and Jewish backgrounds in its midst.

Paul was writing to a group of diverse people, if not socio-economically-speaking, certainly people with different ethnic, political, and religious tendencies. Consequently, it would come as

no surprise that Paul would write primarily about unity. And what unites these people? Only one thing—the foundation of Jesus Christ. And upon that solid foundation, says Paul, they can continue to build together. There was some concern in the group about which teacher some of the individuals chose to follow, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas; in today's terms, it would be like psychologists labeling themselves as Jungian, or Rogerian, or Freudian. And of course, today's theologians do this type of thing, too—ask any twelve ministers about their opinions on, say, atonement, and you'll hear them spout theories from about a dozen different theologians about what exactly happened on the cross. To the Corinthians, Paul says, in essence, "Forget all that stuff. Don't be unwise and build a bridge to nowhere, or a foundation that won't last. You're all rooted in Christ—Christ is your foundation, and your source of wisdom." For Paul knows that these divisions are just that—divisions that take our eyes off the prize, divisions that can be a convenient excuse for us being a bridge to nowhere, divisions that prevent us from using our God-given wisdom for doing what we're actually called to do. Like serving the poor. Caring for the hurting souls within our midst. Reaching out to our neighbors with a hot meal, or a warm hug, or a kind smile. Wisdom that doesn't limit us to our heads, but allows us to experience the life-changing power of God, body, heart, mind, and soul. Wisdom that is based upon a foundation of Jesus Christ, his life, his teachings, his sacrifice, his promise of new life, and his love. Now, don't get me wrong—intellectual discourse is vastly important, and can be a useful vessel of both knowledge and deeper appreciation of God's work in the world. But when it devolves into yet another intellectual exercise that has no bearing on how we actually live, when it does not become a bridge that connects us with one another, we find ourselves in today's church echoing Paul's words from verses 19-20: "He catches the wise in their craftiness and..." The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile." While it sounds like Paul is poo-pooing wisdom here, he actually speaks very highly of it just a few verses before; it is wisdom that is not rooted in Christ that Paul is chastising here. Better put, these "thoughts of the wise" that Paul mentions here can come in a lot of different shades, but could probably best be boiled down to one base color, one commonality: that of arrogance. If only we follow leader x, or belief system y, or pray just so, or try this meditation practice, or do so many good things in our community, surely then, we'll be all set. We'll have it all figured out. We'll have built our bridge. Case closed. This type of thinking creates a different foundation on one's faith—it's about us having the right answer. It's not about Jesus. And while all these things, all of the answers we fill our lives with, in and of themselves might be good things to do, these things can't be the foundation. Only Jesus can be that foundation, that bridge wisely crafted with purpose and intentionality, that bridge that leads us somewhere.

Probably like all of you, I have had my own experiences of gaining and losing wisdom. Many of you probably have heard that I am an ordained minister, and was serving as a full-time Associate Pastor in Marblehead until last fall. By all accounts, I thought I finally had some things figured out. I was enjoying my job—pursuing ordained ministry is a calling I had first felt in middle school. I had attended a credible seminary, and part of my studies focused on Christian Education and Youth Ministry, which was the bulk of the work I was doing at the church. I felt as though, because of my training and experience, I had some knowledge in this area; I had worked with children and youth in various capacities for years so, of course, I had gleaned tremendous nuggets of wisdom. And then, my son Zack was born. For those of you who are parents, you'll be able to relate when I say that I realized in about two minutes that what I thought I "knew" about kids and parenting amounted to very, very little. Parents and non-parents alike, have you ever had the experience of thinking you know conceptually what's going on with a given situation, of thinking that you had wisdom, and then being hit upside the head with actual wisdom, and realizing that your prior so-called "knowledge" all of a sudden goes to a deeper level you didn't even know was possible? Wisdom is a gift that comes directly from God, at God's timing, not ours, and through no effort on our part. Wisdom cannot be forced; it simply flows. There is a reason that many Biblical scholars point to the word "wisdom," "Sophia in Greek," and liken it to the Holy Spirit, which Scripture tells us "blows

where it will.” That is what happened to me when my son was born, 16 months ago today. I never knew I could be so exhausted, so stretched, so scatterbrained and incapable of focus, so full of worry and anxiety. But as I now hold that little body, that little soul that had been entrusted to my husband and me, I also never knew that my heart could love like this. My experience in mommyhood made my heart grow in wisdom, and I realized that, while I was undoubtedly called into ministry, I also felt another call, an undeniable pull to stay with my son, and to help him grow, which led me to decide to leave my ministerial call for the time being in favor of staying at home with Zack. So much for the so-called wisdom I had about children, and about myself; wisdom, I found, is often rooted more in my heart than in my head, and is always a gift from God. It is always a bridge to somewhere, a road leading to the next place to which God is calling me. And it also always makes my prior “wisdom” look much more like folly.

For Paul, the foundation of the church is wise only when it is in Jesus Christ. As he says in verse 11, no one can lay any other foundation for the Corinthians and, I would argue, for us today as well. And later in the passage, “All things are yours...all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.” For us hearing this today, this message can be both uplifting and challenging at the same time. On the one hand, if we remember that we belong to God, that God has us in the palm of God’s hand and cares about us more than we can ever begin to imagine, what good news that can be! To know that we don’t have to have it all figured out all of the time, that God will give us wisdom when we need it—how incredibly freeing! And if we try to live as though everything else flows from that knowledge of God’s love, if we’re doing those good things as an overflow of love, we’re doing exactly what we’re called to do. But on the other hand, living in that way is really, really hard. How often do we consciously remember that we belong to God, and that God is in control, not our so-called “wisdom”? How often do we try to build bridges of our own creation, rather than trusting in God’s wisdom and God’s foundation? If we did remember to trust God more often, we’d worry a whole lot less. There’d be less anxiety, less sniping, less meaningless arguments over who is “right”, more sharing, more compassion, more love. We’d be more... what’s the word? Ah. More Chris-like. More Christian. But this is so hard to do, that we eventually fail. We simply aren’t perfect; the tendency towards thinking that we are wise, that we have things figured out, or at least that we have to figure them out on our own, is the tendency towards which we are all drawn in our human condition. This brings me to the point in my sermon that one of my former teachers used to refer to as the “So, now what?” portion. All this exposition and build-up, but now what are we to do with it?

Thankfully, our buddy Paul doesn’t leave us guessing. The answer, in typical Pauline fashion, is actually quite simple, but by no means easy. Verses 16-17: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?...God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.” The Greek “you” that he uses here is plural. This is written not to an individual, but to a community. In short, Paul says this: You all are already holy. At the risk of sounding like Obi-Wan Kenobi from Star Wars, the force is already within you. Friends, the answer is already inside of you, for God lives in you. The Holy Spirit will give you wisdom. Pilgrim Congregational is a holy place. It is a place to be honored and cared for. May this community remember the wisdom it has, that it stems from a foundation in Jesus Christ, and nowhere else. May you all continue to honor the Holy Spirit, who dwells within you here, so that you may go from there and do the good work to which you have been called. May the Triune God come first, and all the good words you are doing stem from that place of love. May we all endeavor to be wise in the head, heart and soul, rooted in a knowledge of Christ’s love, so that we can be a bridge built wisely, a bridge leading somewhere, that somewhere being whatever new and exciting chapter God might have in store for you, and for this community. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.