

## ***Wiser Than Human Wisdom***

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

March 10, 2024 – Morning Worship on the 4th Sunday of Lent

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

How many folks here like to watch Jeopardy? (pause) I know a lot of people love it. Growing up, my mom never missed it. My brother still watches it every day and we've often talked about the fact that if there was such a thing as team Jeopardy he and I would be unbeatable because we both hold deep reservoirs of trivia but in different areas of life. I think the reason Jeopardy strikes a chord with so many people, and has for so long, is because people like to test how smart they are. That's the same principal behind things like crossword puzzles and Wordle. People just want to test the limits of their own knowledge, their own wisdom as it were, on any given topic. But is mere accumulated knowledge reflective of wisdom? Perhaps but maybe not. After all, knowledge is what allows you to follow a recipe to bake a cake. Wisdom is what inspires you to do it so you can bring it to someone who needs cheering up. There is a difference between knowledge and wisdom. And taking that one step further, there is a huge difference between divine knowledge and human knowledge, between divine wisdom and human wisdom.

As you might expect of me as a Christian preacher, I see this difference as a vitally significant one. It is also one that every preacher, at least those of us who approach the pulpit with a healthy dose of humility, should be keenly focused on during both sermon preparation and delivery. I mean, think about it, the preacher – me, in this case – gets into the pulpit every Sunday with the task of teaching the congregation through the spoken word what it is God is asking of us as believers, what Jesus expects of us as followers, what the Holy Spirit needs from us in response to God's invitation to new life which is the underlying theme of every Sunday. That, dear ones, is

an awesome responsibility and one I take very seriously. It is also a situation that can lead one eventually into a, shall we say, relaxing of standards around this whole notion of whose wisdom is it anyway. By this I mean that it is far too easy for folks with a gift for preaching to focus more on their own gifts, coupled with their own desires, than on the wisdom of God they are supposed to be explaining to their congregations.

Case in point are the many vignettes recounted by Tim Alberta in his book *The Kingdom, the Power and the Glory: American Evangelicals in the Age of Extremism*. The book is filled with stories about evangelical preachers who start their own churches in the Midwest and the South specifically so they can share their own take on what God's wisdom really is – and how everybody else's take is wrong. McGraw recounts how these self-appointed preachers decide they have a unique message and just set up shop in everything from parking lots to rented circus tents to abandoned malls and even from within existing congregations. Their messages tend to be of the fire and brimstone type, with a special focus on how they are right on their reading of the scripture and the Constitution and how our country is heading down the road to hell and it's up to them to take a stand and take our country back. Sadly, I'm sure this sounds all too familiar as we see echoes of this in our own local governments as book banning and school curriculum changes are debated in the name of parental rights and religious freedom. Funny how the only rights and freedoms they seem to care about in their arguments are their own. Wisdom, human or divine, is not even in the mix in these conversations although proponents of such things as book bans, transgender bans and black studies bans are not shy about claiming they know God's will on any of the above.

Another recent example of public officials who unabashedly claim to be speaking on behalf of divine wisdom is the recent decision by the Alabama Supreme Court on February 16 which declared that embryos created through in vitro fertilization (IVF) should be considered children. The reason the original case appeared before the court was that some embryos from an IVF clinic which were being cryo-preserved in a hospital were accidentally destroyed. The couples to whom those embryos belonged sued and one of the laws they cited was the law dealing with the death of minor children. Thus, they were asking the court to recognize that these frozen embryos were children. Ultimately, the court decided they were children which immediately put the entire IVF community into disruption as the newly created liabilities for IVF clinics and doctors became too overwhelming. This was bad enough, but what was most concerning to many was the overtly theological and scriptural language the Chief Justice used in rendering the decision:

*“We believe that each human being, from the moment of conception, is made in the image of God, created by Him to reflect His likeness. It is as if the people of Alabama took what was spoken of the prophet Jeremiah, and applied it to every unborn person in the state. ... Carving out an exception for the people in this case, small as they were, would be unacceptable to the People of this State, who have required us to treat every human being in accordance with the fear of a holy God, who made them in His image.”<sup>1</sup>*

The author of this article on the website of The Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Joshua Sharstein, MD ends his article in which this quote appears with this thoughtful note: “It is a remarkable decision, both in outcome and in the analysis that took us to that outcome.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2024/the-alabama-supreme-courts-ruling-on-frozen-embryos>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Divine wisdom cited in a state Supreme Court decision? Really? I immediately wondered which seminary or divinity school had granted Chief Justice Tom Parker his law degree. Or perhaps his law school also granted Masters of Divinity degrees. What have we come to in this country when scripture is a primary citation in a legal decision which will impact thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of people and their families? Moreover, the Scripture quoted is limited to at most two religious traditions. What about all the other perspectives on God? What about Brahma, Allah, Confucious, and Buddha? They don't count I guess. What has happened to the separation of church and state? Why are there so many people in influential positions in this country who believe they have the ability to render their own opinions on what is, and is not, reflective of divine wisdom, of God's wisdom?

Well, before I go any farther down this track, let's return to today's Scripture for this morning in which Paul uses an entirely different, and definitely more appropriate example of the distinction between God's wisdom and human wisdom. Paul uses the example of the cross of Jesus. He writes, "for the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." So, what exactly is Paul getting at here? The message of the cross he is referring to is the central message, the good news, of the Christian faith. This is the message that Jesus is the Savior, who saves us from the finality of death through his resurrection after his own death on the cross. The nuances of what this means are something we will explore more in depth on Easter but for today, it suffices for us to know that Christ's death and resurrection are the foolishness of the cross Paul is referring to. That's because in Paul's time death on the cross was intended as more than a cruel punishment. It was also meant to end someone's life in

total disgrace, discrediting them and everything they stood for. That Jesus had died on the cross would have signaled that he was no means of salvation for anyone. He was just a disgraced criminal. And Paul was right. By all circumstances at that time, Jesus' death on the cross should have been the end of it. But it wasn't because of the miracle of Easter morning. The people who still consider the cross as foolishness, Paul says, are the people who refuse to see Jesus for who he really was. Therefore, they are perishing in their own ignorance. Their human wisdom lets them down.

But Paul doesn't stop there. He continues, "Where is the one who is wise? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe." Again, Paul is quite literally saying that you cannot know God and God's will through wisdom, through human knowledge alone. Moreover, he says this is how God wants it. In other words, Paul is saying you can't think your way into faith. You can't know your way into faith. You can't understand your way into faith. You either believe, or you don't. And if you don't, the loss is yours. Of course one could argue, and many do, that it's not really a loss if you don't see faith as something of value. That's true, as far as it goes. But, it doesn't go far enough because a lack of faith in God, a lack of trust in God's divine wisdom, only leaves you with human wisdom. It leaves you with the inescapable conclusion that this world we see and know through only our own intellect, through our own senses, is all there is. We have ultimate accountability to no one but ourselves, no recourse in our searching for hope and light when days feel dark and foreboding. Abandoning God's wisdom for the sake of human wisdom alone seems short-sighted at best.

Now the final part of this section of Paul's letter is very problematic for an entirely unrelated yet no less important reason. Paul launches into a tirade about how the "Jews demand signs and the Greeks desire wisdom" which is why the message of the cross is foolishness to them. This, dear ones, is a really horrendous example of an antisemitic text in the New Testament, made even more powerful by the fact that Paul himself was a Jew. So if Paul is criticizing the Jews it must be okay for us as Christians to do the same. In this text Paul is mincing no words about the complete lack of comprehension of who Jesus was on the part of both the Jews (a religious community from which Jesus came and which formed him) and the Greeks (a philosophical school which was a foundational part of being literate in Paul's world). His comments are totally denigrating to both. In particular, his words about the Jews are still dangerous today because they are part of a corpus of New Testament citations used to justify hatred of the Jews who had the chance to follow Jesus and chose not to because they did not believe he was the long awaited Messiah. This particular negative bias toward the Jews for the very reason Paul cites here is a much stronger undercurrent in our discourse, religious and secular, than we ever stop to consider. It's just sort of there, just under the surface, whenever we talk about Jews and the Jewish faith. Usually we don't even recognize its lingering shadow but all that has changed since the October 7 attacks in Gaza. That whole nightmare has blown the lid right off simmering antisemitism and revealed an almost unbelievable lack of comprehension on our parts about much of anything happening today in the Middle East. What has become clear is that the nation of Israel and the Jewish people, those living in Israel and the diaspora living around the world, are not the same thing and it is the nation of Israel under the leadership of a few religious zealots who are responsible for

what is happening in Gaza now, not the Jewish people as a whole. The death and destruction of innocents in Gaza is incomprehensible to everyone. Sadly, how to move beyond this horrific quagmire remains elusive as human wisdom continually falls short, and just what is God's wisdom for this situation remains painfully elusive to too many of the parties involved.

Divine wisdom. Human wisdom. God's ways of knowing and living. Human ways of knowing and living. Seemingly at odds but do they have to be? Surely our gift of wisdom as humans comes from God so there must be a way for us to use our divine gift of human wisdom to do better living as God's people in the world God gifted to us. But how? Perhaps once again Paul's thoughts can be clarifying for us. He says, "for God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." Yes, just yes. We need to remember that no matter how brilliant, how wise, how smart we think we are – God's most foolish moments are wiser than our smartest ones. Similarly, our moments when we feel strong and powerful and on top of it all mean nothing next to God. Even God's weaknesses are stronger, wiser, than we can ever be. This is the very essence of what it means to be humble before God.

The simple truth is that we must always be humble as we receive God's gifts of wisdom and strength. We must never forget that we are not God, and we never will be. We will never have the courage Jesus had as he faced the cross and endured that suffering. Yet, despite all our faults, all the ways in which we fall short of God's expectations for us, we are still beloved of God. More than we can ever imagine. And that, dear ones, is the true miracle of divine wisdom that sees in us only possibilities and promise. May God's boundless love for us embolden us to become the people God created us to be that we may live each day as God intends. May God's gift to us of human wisdom

illuminated by God's love guide our path through life, this day and always. Amen.