

Fools and Wise Ones 7-26-09

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Psalm 14

¹Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is no one who does good.

²The LORD looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God.

³They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one.

⁴Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon the LORD?

⁵There they shall be in great terror, for God is with the company of the righteous.

⁶You would confound the plans of the poor, but the LORD is their refuge.

⁷O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion! When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad.

Last week we delighted in the twenty third Psalm; that beloved Psalm of trust and assurance; that beautiful piece of writing that calms our fears and comforts our ills. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want... Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." Today, we get

to experience the breadth of the Psalms as we hear a different tone, “³They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one.” On the one hand we have a loving, caring, present God. On the other, we have unfaithful, corrupt humanity who, regardless what they claim, basically say in their hearts, “There is no God.” I’m afraid Psalm 14 offers little comfort. Rather, it is an indictment on society - a society that has confounded the poor and consumed those who would follow the path of love and justice for those on the margins.

You know the thing about scripture is that it continues to speak truth in every age. These words of Psalm 14 could have been written yesterday, they create a picture so much like we see these days. Just think about what has been revealed in the last year or so about our values and priorities as a society. The greed and corruption at the highest levels of leadership in business, along with the great power government had given those businesses was revealed as markets collapsed and bailouts began. We heard story after story of over-

reaching without concern for those who would ultimately pay the cost, whether that be the poor, the tax-payers or future generations. We, as a society have had to come face to face with how "normal" greed and corruption had become. So much so, that we often didn't even notice. And the idea of getting what you can and not worrying about who's getting hurt or what the long-term cost may be became the standard operating procedure. And in this context of hubris, those who were thought to be wise, we discover were the fools, who in their hearts maybe thought, "There is not God." Who needs God when we have such power and ability to control and manage global markets and the flow of money and even natural resources. Who needs God, indeed.

Earlier this month Bill Moyers interviewed three prominent Christians about their perspective on society in these times. He spoke with Serene Jones, President of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and, I might add, is an ordained Disciples minister, Cornel West, author and professor at Princeton, and Gary Dorrien, Union Seminary Ethics professor. These three are teaching a class together

called, "Christianity and the US Crisis" looking at economics and democracy from a Christian perspective. In his opening comments, Dr. West says, "There have always been Christians who are well-adjusted to greed, well-adjusted to fear, well-adjusted to bigotry. There's always been Christians who are maladjusted to greed, maladjusted to bigotry, maladjusted to fear. So the question is what kind of Christian, which has to do in the end, with what kind of human being you choose to be." Dr. Jones adds, "Who speaks for the Christianity that stands on the margins of society, in the places where there is no voice.."

These voices, it seems to me, are there with the writer of Psalm 14, looking at society as a whole, and the terrible consequences of greed and corruption on those who have so little to begin with, and asking tough questions about where ones values and priorities stand and in whom one's faith ultimately resides.

Dr. Dorrien thinks that as a society we have "stoked and celebrated greed virtually to the point of self-destruction," and this has created a profound spiritual crisis within culture as a whole. Our

consumer culture has ended up consuming us, which is certainly a foolish thing, indeed. Instead of seeking God, we have been putting our faith in things that do not last including a misplaced faith in our own genius. "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'"

Dr. Jones says we are living a story of sin and grace, and it's about the brokenness of human beings and our capacity to delude ourselves, all the way into the international collapse of all that we stand for. To get caught up in fictions that we write about the ways in which we should structure our lives together. We are seeing played out before us, that classic Protestant claim that we can be caught up in sin and not even know we are in sin." She describes sin as our proclivity to make massive mistakes and to think we understand everything and to think we are the center of the universe. And that, the Psalmist proclaims is the behavior of a fool. In mythology, it's the story of Icarus, who, you'll recall put on the wax wings his father made him and flew higher and higher. His father had warned him not to fly too close to the sun, but alas, he was truly above it all and sure enough, he got

too close, his wings melted, and he plummeted into the sea. "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'" Fools have no need of God. They think they are God.

So there's good news and bad news. The bad news is, "you are not God. I am not God. We are not God." We do not know everything. We do not always do the right thing. We do not always have the big picture in mind. We don't always operate out of love. We don't always think of how what we do affects the weaker members of society. In fact, we're wrong more often than we'd care to admit. The truth is, we can really screw up! Just look at the mess we're in, and even the best and the brightest don't seem to know how to get us out. And we're prone to being too narrow-minded, thinking of the world only in terms of what we know all the while saying we need to think outside the box. Thinking we're so smart, we end up the fool.

Do you want to know what the good news is? The good news is, "you are not God. I am not God. We are not God." There is more than we are. There is purpose and love and mystery and power beyond what

we can grasp or comprehend or bottle and sell. There is mercy and justice and goodness beyond the capacities of evil and hatred. There is a force that, when we acknowledge its existence, when we seek it, when we tap into its energy, we begin the journey of a wise one.

These three Christian thinkers interviewed by Bill Moyers believe it kind of all boils down to a crisis of value. Dr. Jones suggests that we have "misplaced, in deep ways, the ruler that we use to measure what matters most in life. And it has become completely exhausted by monetary value." And of course, this has happened again, and again in history. There is nothing new about it, except that, at the moment we are more aware that it has happened than we were even a year ago. You've probably heard the saying that the definition of insanity is repeating the same behavior over and over again and expecting different results." That sounds so foolish, doesn't it? - Putting faith in something that has proven not worthy, and then doing it again and again. Like markets and wax wings and diet fads, we humans are a bit crazy putting so much faith in these very fallible things. So where do

we find our sanity? How do we find peace and healing and the promise of a bright tomorrow?

The answer, at least for those who understand there is more, for those who understand there is purpose and meaning and depth, is in trying to see the world through God's eyes - through the eyes of love. And as we begin to open up our eyes and hearts and minds to that great source of our being, we become connected to the hope for this world, created and beloved of God. Not a perfect world, but surely one worth giving our very best for. As Dr. West puts it, "...as a Christian, I know there'll never be paradise in space and time. There'll never be a utopia in human history. The question is: do we have the kind of conviction, commitment, courage and willingness to serve to make things better the short time that we are here to pass onto our children?" The Psalmist might ask, "Are we wise enough to seek the ways of God, ways that seek the well-being of the poor and marginalized?" And Jesus might ask, "Do you love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength, and you neighbor as yourself?"

We are at a crossroads in history. This is actually a great time to be church! The world is hungry for life which is really life, food that really satisfies, meaning that goes beyond tomorrow. If we are wise, we will let go of the foolish ways and seek direction in God's unending love and grace. Amen.