

**Fifth Sunday in Lent (Lent 5B) – March 22, 2015**  
**Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-13; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

**The Foolishness and Wisdom of the Divine Framework**

Jeremiah, in our first reading, asserts that Judah will die in order to become a greater people; and in our gospel, Jesus responds to some Greeks seeking wisdom as he names his way as the way of the cross. He states, "...unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." Now the correct translation of the latter part of this (John 12:25) *in its context* should read, "The person who selfishly wants to retain that person's life is going to lose it, and the person who selflessly gives that person's life to others in this world will actually retain it into life eternally." Okay, but our society does not like such messages, even though they're the core of the gospel. According to our dominant social values, the purpose of life is to accumulate, not give away; to be successful, and thus avoid the shame of failure. These urges are not new, of course, but we've elevated them to a high form of deception and self-deception. In the process we have exalted ambitious acquisitiveness while laws, policies and programs created for the lofty aim of the "common good" often are acted out on the basis of the common greed. As Saul Alinsky put it, this is "a world not of angels, but of angles, where [people] speak of moral principles [such as fairness and equity] but act on power principles [of "what's mine is mine and what's yours is mine."...]...a world where [so-called] "reconciliation" [can] mean [no more than,] that when one side gets [all] the power and the other side gets "reconciled" to it, then [you] have "reconciliation."<sup>i</sup> Well, Jesus calls us to another set of values and behavior. His words seem strange, even quaint or naïve. And yet there is no place to hide from these words—these values—of Jesus, because there is now no place to hide from the crash of over-inflated societal values and expectations. Our economic system is still headed for many in the direction toward bottom, like a derailed train heading over a bridge; while another train with just a few on it seems headed for a golden city. The trouble is they share the same track as they head towards each other. Yet, in this foreboding situation we will hopefully find the place where market values and Jesus' values might collide, as it were, and rediscover that the visible, material world in which we believe ourselves to be so much at home relies for its very existence on a deeper, spiritual framework which gives it its real purpose.

When we deal with the issues and people in our personal relationships, or in the workplace, in various communities *and* in society at large at a national and global scale, we are called to make the principles of love and justice effective as far as possible. Yet we cannot escape the conclusion that society as such is often brutal, selfish and short-sighted and that our acting on these principles may in our short lives be never more than tiny seeds or specks of leaven in it. And so, we are called to be seeds or leaven, *not* the whole loaf, mind you, while understanding that, as leaven or seeds, we need a lump, as it were, to go into that we may germinate—both an ecclesiastical lump as well as a wider worldly secular lump.<sup>ii</sup> Some large and powerful social, economic, political, and religious forces at work today seem hardly qualified by really ethical considerations. If we can do

nothing else, we can bear witness to God until the day that bitter or even catastrophic experience will force individuals and institutions and nations to a humility which we do not now possess. To be a seed or leaven sown in a situation like this is to live as though humanity alone is responsible, as though humanity alone can secure a sustainable future for ourselves and all those who come after us. Yet, it is also to live with the understanding that God alone can save us, and with the sure hope that God will fulfill God's purposes and become "all in all."<sup>iii</sup> And so we pray as though everything depends on God, so that we can act as though everything depends on us.

Jesus looked at his society, and found there many of the same corrupting elements that are so troubling in our own time. He saw a society on the edge of collapse, in large part because of the pursuit of the same goals and purposes that so trouble us today. Jesus saw the desire of people to secure their material existence leading them into practices that destroyed their spirits, and, in the end, failed their material goals as well. And he taught them with simple earthy analogies. The speculated, hoarded, stockpiled grain spoils and goes rotten. It's the planted grain that bears fruit. Life spent on behalf of others has meaning that transcends the material circumstances of life. People mean more than things. Accomplishments are always replaced, whereas acts of love leave a permanent mark. These are not theories or ideals; rather, they are the *framework* from which the universe is run, Jesus implies. What does it mean to live with the awareness of a "divine framework"? It does not mean neglecting our gifts and responsibilities or failing to manage our resources prudently. It does mean getting our priorities straight. Along with our readings today, the Bible says it in several other ways. Store up treasure for yourself in heaven. Strive for God's Kingdom, Jesus says, and these things will be given to you as well. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, says Paul. Stretch your heart and make it generous, in both good and hard times. Walk away early from the siren call of greed and avarice before they harden your heart. Be aware that the calculating heart will never be at peace.<sup>iv</sup> The kingdom of God will open wide to us if we travel lighter, alert to every opportunity to give ourselves away. And when we do, heaven will come to earth in our lives.<sup>v</sup>

In just a week we begin Holy Week. The events remembered during Holy Week and Easter provide us an opportunity to sense that divine framework, and to reflect upon what it means in our lives. Not usually included in the events of Holy Week is April Fool's Day which, this year, happens to fall right in the middle of that week. In some ways, there's something appropriate about that. After all, so many of us think and act as though Jesus' words are just foolishness and too simplistic? What do we make of *our* worldly wisdom, *and* of what we hear and see in Jesus, namely, what St. Paul calls "the foolishness of God"?<sup>vi</sup> Frederick Buechner put it something like this:

"The wisdom of [humanity] is the kind of worldly wisdom that more or less [everyone has been living since the time we all lived in caves]. It is best exemplified by such homely [sayings] as 'you've got your own life to lead,' [or] 'business is business,' or 'charity begins at home,' or 'Don't get involved' or 'God helps those who help themselves,' 'safety first' and [so on]. Although this wisdom can lead on occasion to ruthlessness and indifference, [on the whole, this way of thinking and

acting is very compatible with being nice, and decent and respectable. Any person] can be basically interested in nothing so much as feathering [their] own nest, and still give generously to the [United Way or their favorite charity, be on church and civic committees] and have a soft spot in their heart for children and animals...[I recall] vehicle inspection stickers [that] used to have printed on the back, ‘Drive carefully—the life you save may be your own.’ That is the wisdom of [humanity] in a nutshell. It is in contrast to all this, that what St. Paul calls “the foolishness of God” looks so foolish. [In contrast to “the life you save may be your own,” Jesus says,] ‘the life you save is the life you lose.’ In other words, the life you clutch, hoard, guard and play [too] safe with is in the end a life worth little to anybody, including yourself; and only a life given away for love’s sake is [the] life [most] worth living.”<sup>vii</sup>

Just as a seed cannot truly grow into what God intends it to be unless it is cracked open; so also, the life you save is the life you lose.<sup>viii</sup> Again, as Buechner states, “To bring his point home, God shows us [one] who gave his life away to the extent of dying a national disgrace without a penny in the bank or a friend to his name. In terms of [humanity’s] wisdom, [Jesus] was [the] Perfect Fool [and the perfect reflection of the foolishness of God].”<sup>ix</sup> God born in a stable, baptized with sinners, identified with weak disciples and other misfits—confronting the major commercial, religious, legal and imperial powers of his day, mocked, tortured and put to death on a cross. That seems so distant from the niceness and respectability and the basic selfishness of so much human wisdom.

Yet Jesus’ way, and truth and life were lived out in self-giving love, the ultimate expression of God’s wisdom. So then, if the world is sane, then Jesus is mad as a hatter, and his Last Supper was his Mad Tea Party. The world says, “Mind your own business,” and Jesus says there’s no such thing as your own business. The world says “who says you can’t have it all”—follow the money and be a success; and Jesus says “Follow me” and be crucified. The world says, “Drive carefully; the life you save may be your own”—and Jesus says whoever would save his or her life will lose it, and whoever loses his or her life for my sake will find it.<sup>x</sup> The world says “Get,” and Jesus says “Give.” In terms of the world’s sanity Jesus is crazy as a coot, and anybody who thinks he or she can follow him without being a little crazy, too, is laboring less under a cross than under a delusion.<sup>xi</sup>

Now, we don’t need to skip over the next couple of weeks and rush to the Risen Lord of Easter to see that the divine foolishness of Christ was really ultimate wisdom. He showed us that a life given away for love’s sake and God’s justice is the life most worth living. It’s important to note that the cross of Christ is more a symbol of life than of death, of living than of dying, for it takes a lot of living to be selected as a target for martyrdom.

As Buechner concludes—there are two kinds of fools in the world: what St. Paul called “fools for Christ’s sake,”<sup>xii</sup> and damned fools.<sup>xiii</sup> One small illustration of the difference between these two kinds of fools was recorded by Mother Teresa as she observed one of her Sisters of Charity out on a medical team in a slum in Calcutta, cleaning and dressing the sores of lepers right on a busy roadside. A journalist with camera in hand came by where the sisters were working. He snapped some photos and looked for a moment at

what one of the sisters was doing, and he said, “I wouldn’t do that for a million dollars.” The sister just smiled and went on with her work, and replied, “Neither would I.”

<sup>i</sup> Saul Alinsky, Rules for Radicals (New York: Random House/Vintage Books, 1971), p. 13.

<sup>ii</sup> Paraphrased from Ron Ferguson with Mark Chater, Mole Under the Fence: Conversations with Roland Walls (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2006), p. 133.

<sup>iii</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23.

<sup>iv</sup> A flexibility in accepting both gain and loss each day, an openness to surprise, and a sense of humor are all marks of connecting to the source of true security.

<sup>v</sup> Or, as the Catholic social thinker Peter Maurin wrote some 80 years ago,

“The world would be better off if people tried to become better.  
And people would become better if they stopped trying to become better off.  
For when everybody tries to become better off, nobody is better off.  
But when everybody tries to become better, everybody is better off...  
And everybody would be what he ought to be,  
if everybody tried to be what he wants the other fellow to be.”

(Peter Maurin, Easy Essays (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1961), p. 37).

<sup>vi</sup> I Corinthians 4:18-25

<sup>vii</sup> Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 27-28

<sup>viii</sup> As one observer put it,

“A crack can be an opening...while the crack in an ordinary teacup makes it a leaky container, no longer safe. The original meaning of the word comes from the sound it makes, as if something is breaking, the connotations often negative. Cracks evoke dryness, like...barren earth...the dry lips of fever...Psychologically, a crack in the façade suggests a false persona. The splitting experience of mental illness is often felt as if one’s whole world is breaking apart, concretely envisioned in the poet Weldon Lee’s words: ‘The crack is moving down the wall.’ Our voice cracks in a moment of insecurity, but we may be restored by ‘cracking up’ as we burst out laughing. Then there are the cracks...which lead to other realities...as Leonard Cohen describes it...‘There is a crack in everything / that is how the light gets in.’ The new day arrives at the crack of dawn with all its potentials—a gateway between night and day...where prayers travel up to heaven. The word ‘crack’ is also used for decoding an ancient alphabet or a secret language [or hidden truth]...[But] when something ‘falls between the cracks’ it is forgotten or lost...”

(Quoted in “Crack” in The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), p. 782).

<sup>ix</sup> Buechner, *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>x</sup> The world says “Law and Order;” and Jesus says “Love and Justice.”

<sup>xi</sup> Frederick Buechner, Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations with Frederick Buechner (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), p. 95

<sup>xii</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:10

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<sup>xiii</sup> Buechner, Wishful Thinking, *ibid.*, p. 28.