Worldly Wisdom and Foolish Grace

Exodus 22:20-26 June 29, 2025

Mark 7:1-15 Southminster Presbyterian Church, Portland, OR

I Cor 1:18-21 Barbara J. Campbell, Guest

**Exodus 22:20-26**

**20**“Whoever sacrifices to any god other than the Lord alone shall be devoted to destruction.

**21**“You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. **22**You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. **23**If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; **24**my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.

**25**“If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. **26**If you take your neighbor’s cloak as guarantee, you shall restore it before the sun goes down, **27**for it may be your neighbor’s only clothing to use as a cover. In what else shall that person sleep? And when your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate.

**Mark 7:1-15**

**7**Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, **2**they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. **3**(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders, **4**and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash, and there are also many other traditions that they observe: the washing of cups and pots and bronze kettles and beds.) **5**So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders but eat with defiled hands?” **6**He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips,
    but their hearts are far from me;
**7**in vain do they worship me,
    teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

**8**“You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

**9**Then he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! **10**For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ **11**But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God), **12**then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, **13**thus nullifying the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.”

**14**Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: **15**there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

**I Cor 1:18-21**

**18**For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. **19**For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
    and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

**20**Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? **21**For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of the proclamation, to save those who believe.

Years ago, I decided to write a book

 on the hardest lessons from Rabbi Jesus.

I picked ten texts with those hardest words

 for what I thought would be ten nice chapters.

It was much harder than I thought it would be.

 Why would anyone want to write about

the hardest things?

 But are there any easy things he said?

I tried, gave up and put it on the back burner

 over and over again.

If it hadn’t been for the Covid quarantine,

 it would never have been finished.

When I read what I had written

 it still didn’t seem to make sense

until, one morning, I woke up and heard these words:

 “You wrote that pre-Trump!”

Suddenly, the lessons Jesus taught

 were even more important

 because they stood in stark contrast

 to the absurdity if our leaders

and most of their followers.

The other thing that I realized

was missing in what I had written

 was the similarities between

the core beliefs of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

“And be virtuous towards parents and kinsfolk, towards orphans and indigent, toward the neighbor who is of kin and the neighbor who is not of kin, toward the companion at your side and the traveler, and towards those whom your right hand s possess.” Quran 4:36b

My brothers and sisters in Abraham’s Tent

 had taught me that those were values we shared

and that dimension should be in the book.

During the presidential campaign and election of 2016,

the divisions between the right and left wings

of religion and culture

became dramatically deeper.

Common etiquette and civilized behavior

was suddenly ignored in the plain view

of audiences everywhere.

The moral values that most of us held dear,

regardless of which side of the fence we were on,

values like kindness, compassion, and understanding,

were threatened;

truth seemed to prevail only in the eyes of the beholder

who could self-select the truth that fit their agenda;

and goals of justice and equality were replaced

with fear of strangers and threatened egos.

Although we know that many in our world

 are truly wise and have great understanding,

today, perhaps more than ever,

 we are aware of attitudes and perspectives

that are based instead on fear, lack of understanding,

and ensuring personal power.

Webster defines “wisdom” as,

“1 a: accumulated philosophic or scientific learning: KNOWLEDGE

b: ability to discern inner qualities and relationships: INSIGHT

c: good sense: JUDGMENT

The term “foolish grace” was coined when the Apostle Paul

wrote to the followers of Jesus in Corinth that

“the message of the cross is foolishness.”(1 Cor 1:18)

The life and death of Jesus was about

unmerited, unconditional, sacrificial love

rather than submission to the injustices

of Roman oppression.

“Foolish grace” points to the fact that such unmerited favor

is seen as unwise or unbelievable

by many worldly standards.

In truth, though it may seem foolish

to those whose goal is personal gain and security,

such “foolish” grace is proven to lead to fullness of “life.”

We have seen, again and again,

 That the road to a lasting peace is thru non-violence,

 understanding, and compassion.

“Worldly wisdom” declares, “You should fear the stranger,

 and use violence to protect yourself from your enemies,”

but “foolish grace” declares

“Love and bless even your enemies!”

“Worldly wisdom” declares, “You will be happier

if you are wealthy and have the best life can offer,”

but “foolish grace” declares, “sell all you have

 and give the money to the poor!”

“Worldly wisdom” declares, “Women and children are weak

 and less valuable in our society,”

but “foolish grace” declares,

 “Welcome the children for to such as these

 the new kingdom exists.”

“Worldly wisdom” can be so subtle

 and deceptively appealing.

When most everyone around you is acting

 as if certain behaviors are acceptable and normal,

 how can they be wrong?

Our Gospel reading today, is a good example

Rabbi Jesus is in the middle of a religious debate

on the commandments handed down by Moses

as opposed to the later practices called,

"The tradition of the elders."

The debate began when some in the crowd

asked why the disciples of Rabbi Jesus

 were eating without washing their hands,

when the Pharisees, and “all the Jews,”

washed their hands before eating

observing the tradition of the elders.

According to Hebrew scholar Amy-Jill Levine,

it was actually more likely that most Jews

rarely followed this tradition.

Moses had not passed down laws about such cleanliness,

but only commanded ritual bathing

before entering the temple.

So, Rabbi Jesus brings up

the example of another human tradition

that was causing conflict in the community.

“The commandment to ‘Honor your mother and father,’

he said, "was being watered down by human precepts.”

According to Torah,

devout Jews, male and female, rich or poor

were expected to give a half shekel once a year

to the temple as an offering, or “korban.”

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A biblical shekel would be the equivalent

 of $14-15 today.

 But it also amounted to

 half a month’s wages for most people.

The Pharisees interpreted this law

to allow that gifts of property and goods

which were at least pledged to God annually

could be deducted from support for parents

that was subscribed by Jewish law.

There was a time when the tradition had been

to forgive these pledged offerings

if a family had other pressing needs,

but more recently the tradition had changed back

to holding the people firmly

to their obligation to the temple,

tempting them to turn their back

on their responsibilities to their parents.

Jesus said to those who were defending this human precept,

“You despise the word of God with these traditions

you have handed down.’(Mark 7:10-13)

Then, returning to the complaint

about eating with dirty hands, he said,

"Listen to me, all of you, and understand.

There is nothing outside a person

that by going in can defile;

but the things that come out are what defile."(Mark 7:20)

He challenged the world wisdom that,

“if you just follow certain cultural norms,

God will be happy with you.”

Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Presbyterian Seminary

Dr. Walter Brueggemann, who died recently at the age of 92,

was a champion at challenging worldly wisdom.

During his long ministry of educating new theologians,

Dr. Brueggemann wrote 58 books in which he

“argued that the Church

must provide a counter-narrative

to the dominant forces of [consumerism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consumerism),

[militarism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Militarism), and [nationalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nationalism).”

 His most well-known book is

 “The Prophet Imagination.”

Adam Russell Tayor writer for Sojourners magazine

wrote about the legacy of this great theologian,

in an article entitled,

 “The ‘Dangerous Oddness’ of Walter Brueggemann.”

 in other words, about his foolish grace.

Brueggemann wrote things like this:

“In both his teaching and his very presence,

Jesus of Nazareth presented the ultimate criticism

of the royal consciousness.

He has, in fact, dismantled the dominant culture

and nullified its claims.

The way of his ultimate criticism

is his decisive solidarity with marginal people

and the accompanying vulnerability

required by that solidarity.

The only solidarity worth affirming

 is solidarity characterized

by the same helplessness

(that the marginalized) know and experience.”

Such a claim in our culture today,

 is indeed dangerously odd.

I knew that if I preached at Southminster

 about the social justice challenges we face today,

 I would certainly be preaching to the choir.

The issue then became what to say to this “choir,”

 who already knows the struggle,

that will give them a word of comfort and hope

 and perhaps convict all of us,

 to continue to search diligently

 for a new and better way

 to spread foolish grace.

Here is the challenge Dr. Brueggemann

gave to his students and the Church:

“Many of us benefit from the marginality of the poor,

and we do not want it to change.

In the real commitments of our lives,

we are deeply in conflict with the new reign (of God.)

And we are without hope,

meaning we do not want,

expect, or welcome (that) new leader.

But the new sovereign comes on the wind

—by the Spirit; (Isaiah 11:2, Matthew 3:11, Romans 15:13).

that means he cannot be stopped

and will not be resisted.

The Spirit works through us,

among us, and even against us.

The Spirit in these days would indeed work

against our hopelessness to let us hope.” (end quote)

Most of us have been wracking our brains

 trying to find some sort of solution to the ills that,

 as that ancient hymn says, “prevail against us.”

I can think of no better start to finding a solution,

than what Brueggemann suggests:

“We need to ask not whether it is realistic or practical or viable

but whether it is *imaginable*.

We need to ask if our consciousness and imagination

have been so assaulted and co-opted

by the royal consciousness

that we have been robbed of the courage or power

to think an alternative thought …

the *imagination*must come before the *implementation*..”

In 2022, Dr. Brueggemann agreed to work with

Conrad Kanagy, a pastor and Professor of Sociology

 in writing a biography of Brueggemann’s life,

which Kanagy entitled

“Walter Brueggemann’s Prophetic Imagination.”

Kanagy, writes in his preface to the book

about agonizing as he prepared

to preach in 2021 on the subject of racism.

He knew that the atmosphere had changed dramatically

 in the previous decade. . .

 and some in his congregation had

 become much more conservative.

He writes, “Just as the sermon reached its climax,

 along with my anxiety,

 the bells of a local church began to toll

“A Mighty Fortress is Our God.”

As the bells rang, I could not compete.

 I stopped and for a moment everyone heard

 “and though this world with devils filled

 should threaten to undo us, we will not fear . . .

 one little Word shall fell them.”

And in the silence of that moment, I remembered

 that the Word came not to raise an army

 against or for an empire.

 Instead, the Word sneaked quietly

 and unnoticed into the world.

 And it ambushed those powers from below

 by a greater power – the power of love.

 not by rage, division, or discord.

At that moment I glimpsed that alternative Kingdom

 about which Brueggemann had been writing

 for nearly forty years.

He had drilled, drilled, and drilled

 the same imaginative message

 while hearing and sharing it anew for each generation.”

In a moment. weare going to sing that hymn

 that the bells tolled for Kanagy.

I first thought we should leave out verse three,

 because most of us would hear the word “Devil”

 as applying only to a single individual.

But I think we should add it back in,

 remembering that worldly wisdom is a devil

 we all dance with at times.

Dr Breuggmann wrote nine prayers to accompany his biography.

One of Walter’s prayers is called

“The Sower Who Seeds the New Kingdom.”

You are the sower of seeds among us:

 The seeds you plant are so small that we do

 not notice their offer of mercy;

 The seeds you plant are so tiny that we do

 not observe their gift of forgiveness.

 The seeds you plant are so minuscule that we

 do not heed their summon to justice.

And we – we are the soil that may receive the seeds you sow:

 Some days we are bird-infested:

 before we have a chance,

 they fly away, and we are left seedless

 But not every day!

Some days we are rocky, unreceptive soil,

 hard-nosed, cynical, indifferent,

 and the seeds have no chance with us.

 But not every day!

Some days we are soil filled with thorns

 that are prickly and hostile,

 choking off your seeds of compassion

 giving them no chance to sprout.

 But not every day!

Some days we are good soil.

 We have no predatory birds in our midst.

 We have no choking resistance.

 We have no prickly thorns on our persons.

We receive the seed of your kingdom with welcome.

We host your seed of mercy and compassion and justice.

 They sprout among us, and we see

the growth of your neighborly kingdom;

 not every day . . . but some days:

some days ready;

some days fertile;

some days receptive,

 ready for mercy, fertile with compassion,

 receptive to justice.

Lord of all our days and governor of all our times,

 let this day be such a day for us.

We will gladly receive the seed you sow.

We see it grow into wellbeing.

 We will be grateful.

 We will sing praise, and be glad

 that we could be hosting soil

for your gracious newness.

 Amen.