

3-7-2021 – “Wiser is Humbler” – Rev Mike Eggleston at St Benedict’s – I Corinthians 1.18-25

Guidance from God can be found anywhere, because God is everywhere. Me, I most often get insights from God either through nature or through scriptures and church tradition. That’s good because those two, nature and torah, are the two forums of God which are praised in Psalm 19. “The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple.” But the start of this sermon comes from a source where I’d, never found a message from God before, namely, clickbait. Clickbait, if case you’re lucky enough to not know, is the name for the little come-on sites on your computer which tease your curiosity about something you might like to know. So you click on the title, and before you know it leads you on a merry chase of 30 more screens one after the other which keep teasing that the answer is right on the next click, but it never is. Usually after five or ten clicks you realize I’ve been had, this is leading nowhere, so you exit the chain muttering to yourself. 99 times out of a hundred, that’s clickbait. Last week I actually followed one to the end and thought, oh, wow, this one actually delivered what I hoped, and it might even be a word from God.

The title was something like, “Why did this teacher wear the same dress in class for one hundred days?” I clicked on that knowing that schools in our area might re-open for in-person learning this week, so there just might be a sermon illustration in there. Which there was, is. The clickbait told a story which actually happened two years ago. Julia Mooney was a middle school art teacher in New Jersey who started the first day of the fall quarter wearing a simple, gray, button-down dress. And she wore the same plain gray dress the next day, the next, the next, and so on, while all of her fashion-conscious students were wondering. Is Mrs. Mooney going to show up in that same ugly frock again tomorrow? It’s been a week now. Does she wash it? Yeah, I guess, the stains from yesterday’s art weren’t there today. Is she going to wear it again tomorrow? Why? Is she poor, is she part of some weird religious cult? She can’t be blind because she’s the art teacher, so is she fashion-blind? Is it the only outfit she owns? Students who bumped into her on weekends found she was wearing the same dress seven days a week. Soon they began asking her why, as did parents and staff members and principles and such. After many weeks, Mrs. Mooney began giving some answers about why. She was committed to wearing it for 100 straight days. Why? Well, it was an experiment, and a teaching tool, and an action based on principles. You’ll maybe like her principles. I hope all her middle school students did too. They included:

1. Simplify. It saves a lot of time and money not worrying everyday about your outfit and what people think of it.
2. Reduce and re-use. Stop cultivating a culture of excess “fast fashion” that hurts the environment and young people.
3. Be real. Use our energy to BE good and interesting humans instead of LOOKING like good and interesting people.

So. Evidently Mrs. Moody’s One Dress/100 Days campaign has gained some followers and helped many people to practice a humbler lifestyle. Which brings me to our scriptures today, and a message which may be a common thread in all of them. That common message, and the sermon title today, is “Wiser is Humbler.” I find that especially in our First Corinthians 1 passage. There Paul turns

upside down all of his culture's views of what constitutes wisdom. Trying to define wisdom goes way beyond the scope of one sermon. Generally, wisdom has meant understanding how to live a good and full life; but different cultures have emphasized different paths to a good life. For the Jewish culture in which Paul was raised, wisdom centered on knowing the scriptures inside and out and living them. For the Greco-Roman culture in which Paul worked, wisdom majored in reason and especially rhetoric, the ability to use language most persuasively. In today's culture, I suppose wisdom centers on mastering technology and finance. Torah, communication, technology and wealth; these were the paths to a good and full life. Paul turned all those on their head by teaching a deeper wisdom. "We proclaim Christ crucified, a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God." A few verses later Paul says, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified."

Wow. That's not clickbait, trivia that leads nowhere. That's much more shocking than wearing a plain gray dress everyday to encourage people to live humbler lives. Paul and others like him spread a shocking new understanding of wisdom. God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom whether Torah or science or technology, and Paul's two-word thumbnail sketch of true wisdom is "Christ crucified". One wonders. That couldn't have been an easy product to market and sell. Who wants to get crucified? Who wants to follow a leader who got himself crucified which was the punishment for rebellious slaves and insurrectionists. How did Paul's message ever sweep the world, that God's wisdom and power is packed and concentrated into one occasion when a righteous man gave up his life for his friends? I don't know that message ever succeeded and spread throughout the world. . .Unless it's true. Paul somehow sold that impossible message, that Christ crucified is the essence of God's wisdom and power for us. Paul of course wasn't alone. John sold the same message, that God so loved the world. Mary Magdalene and the other Marys sold the message, that the one who was crucified for us now lives for us and in us. St Benedict and John Wesley and Mother Theresa and Nelson Mandela and Thich Nhat Hanh and most people you and I admire the most have carried that message, that self-giving, persisting love as exemplified by a crucified Christ will prevail. That is wiser and more powerful than anything else we'll ever meet, for it flows from the heart of God.

But preachers like me sometimes get entranced with things too wondrous for us. I had a lesser message, a smaller part of the wisdom of God, to press forward today. That message, again, is, wiser is humbler. For Christ is, says Paul in Philippians, the one who humbled himself even unto death on a cross. And humbleness is part of our calling in Christ. Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord, say the letters of James, and Peter. I think that humbler needs to become a main part of our emerging, ecological way of life. Notice the first three letters of humble are also the first three letters of human, and humane, and lots of other good words. That's because they all come from a Latin and even earlier proto-European root that means earth, dirt, soil. We've entered an age when we need to learn wisdom from earth, of which we are made.

Practice living humbler however you can. Often that means getting down closer to earth. Humble sometimes involves getting down on our knees to garden. Or getting down on our knees to pray. Humble sometimes means getting down on our knees to be with children. Small animals also

get us down closer to earth while at the same time delighting our hearts. There are so many ways to practice humbler. Humber may take the form of buying less reusing more. Humber often grows as we volunteer with our neighbors. Humber grows as we find ways to interact with people of different cultures and differing viewpoints than our own. (Humber grows by listening, harder work than speaking.) And of course humber is calling to us from all around us. The heavens are telling the glory of God; those stars humble us. The ocean humbles us, so much vaster and steadier than we are. Growing older humbles us most every day. If we do get down on our knees, we find more and more that we need to ask help from someone to get us back up. And if we can receive help, we're more likely to give help, all of which makes us humbler, closer to our nature as earthlings.

I have an experience coming up to increase humbler and wiser. I've been tasked by People of Faith for Justice to come up with a study which would introduce the basics of Process Thought. We hope that study might be a step towards launching a small Center for Ecological Civilization in our county, something like your Hollister Institute. Anyway, I was asked to do something I love, read books searching for the best one to introduce Process Philosophy. And by the way, Mike, make sure you consider one simple and sweet little book, Piglet's Process, almost a children's book for adults. It introduces process thought through a series of fictional dialogues between the philosopher/author and Piglet, a small stuffed animal in AA Milne's Winnie the Pooh books. Well, I'm too grown up for Winnie the Pooh books, I never did like 'em. I read Piglet's Process, but then I went ahead and looked for better study materials in 6 or 7 more erudite books. Process thinking is a very grown-up, intellectual form of wisdom you see. Pastor Caro suggested one of the books I read in part, a fascinating study from a Jewish perspective. But eventually you have to choose what might work. And what might work might be very humbling. I guess you've already guessed how it comes out. Just after Easter, I and whoever might join me weekly can study erudite Whiteheadian process thinking through our dialogues with a humble stuffed animal. Here's a closing word from Piglet's Process:

"'It's hard to be brave', Piglet said sniffing slightly, 'when you're only a Very Small Animal.' Rabbit who had begun to write very busily looked up and said, 'It's because you are very small animal that you'll be useful in this adventure before us.' In the 100 Aker wood everyone matters, concludes author Bruce Epperly. As St Therese of Lisieux wrote, "do little things with great love." Amen.