

Against Stupidity

John 14:23-29

Sixth Sunday of Easter, (May 26) 2019

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Raise your hands if you are against stupidity.

I hope all of you voted against stupidity. If we put the vote up in Congress in Washington or in the Legislature in Austin, who knows how the vote might come out? Many of you might remember a few years ago when there was a vote in the U.S. Congress to remove the word “lunatic” from federal law. Advocates said the word “lunatic” was out of date and demeaning to people who suffer from mental illness. The vote was 398-1, with our own Congressman Louie Gohmert the lone vote in favor of keeping “lunatic” in federal law.

Not long after that my friend Charlie Johnson was with a delegation of clergy visiting members of the House and Senate talking about public education. They visited Congressman Gohmert and at the end of the meeting they asked if they could pray with the congressman, who readily agreed. They asked him what he would like for them to pray and he said, “Don’t pray that I have courage. I have plenty of that. Pray that I have wisdom.” So Charlie Johnson led in a prayer asking God to give Louie Gohmert wisdom.

Perhaps this amuses us but let’s give the congressman credit that he knew enough to ask for divine wisdom.

A couple of weeks ago, Congressman Mo Brooks, member of the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology during an exchange with a witness about rising sea levels and climate change, questioned scientist Phil Duffy of the Woods Hole Research Center. Brooks said that silt and mud washed by rivers into the ocean caused water levels to rise as it settled on the sea floor. “Now you have got less space in those oceans because the bottom is moving up,” he said. He went on: “What about the White Cliffs of Dover . . . [and] California, where you have the waves crashing against the shorelines, and time and time again you have the cliffs crashing into the sea? All of that displaces water which forces it to rise, does it not?”

I know, I know, we could talk about stupidity in Washington and Austin all day. It’s easy. At the same time, I want us to begin to think about stupidity clearly and more specifically. For instance, stupidity is not to be confused with ignorance. Ignorance has more to do with not knowing information. This last week I read a story of a woman having emergency surgery for a ruptured ectopic pregnancy a few months ago. The woman called the doctor’s office a week later in tears over why didn’t they reimplant her pregnancy in her uterus so her baby could have lived. The doctor patiently explained that this was not an option and could not be done. This was a case of ignorance. She did not know and explaining the truth convinced her differently. At the same time, many politicians are spreading this kind of falsehood in the interest of power and no amount of explanation will change their minds. At the least, this is willful and therefore stupid. And stupidity, not ignorance, is considered a sin.

Karl Barth said stupidity is related to the deadly sin of sloth. It is lazy thinking or what Hannah Arendt called “not thinking.” She said that constant distraction and never leaving the company of one’s in-group were the culprits.

Barth said that stupidity is a form of the demonic (see Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 412-414; Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 2, p. 80).

Andre Trocme, the pastor of the church in Le Chambon, which led in protecting Jews in southern France and smuggling them to Switzerland, was taken to a Vichy French police station in 1943 for questioning and eventually put in an internment camp. Author Philip Haille writes that Trocme's encounter with the police captain was eye opening. Trocme "discovered people like the captain – patriotic, sincere, but above all severely *limited*. These people were capable of repeating hate-ridden clichés without any concern for evidence or for the pain of others." The captain was furious with Trocme, "What? Protecting Jews? Oh – that's lovely. Now that doesn't surprise me. You're a part of their conspiracy, eh? We all know that they're the ones who have brought France down into the abyss. Well, you're going to pay for this. You're going to pay for all the harm you've done to Marshal [Petain]." Trocme saw this policeman again in 1955 in Algeria and said he was once again a "patriot" – an "enforcer and defender of the law of the land, no matter what the law might be" (*Lest Innocent Blood be Shed*, p. 29-30).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a remarkable essay in December 1942 called *After Ten Years*, and has a subsection called "On Stupidity." He says, "Stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of the good than malice... Against stupidity we are defenseless. Neither protests nor the use of force accomplish anything here; reasons fall on deaf ears; facts that contradict one's prejudgment simply need not be believed ... and when facts are irrefutable they are just pushed aside as inconsequential, as incidental. In all this the stupid person, in contrast to the malicious one, is utterly self-satisfied and, being easily irritated, becomes dangerous by going on the attack. ... Never again will we try to persuade the

stupid person with reasons, for it is senseless and dangerous.” He goes on, “In conversation with him, one virtually feels that one is dealing not at all with him as a person, but with slogans, catchwords, and the like that have taken possession of him. He is under a spell, blinded, misused, and abused in his very being. Having thus become a mindless tool, the stupid person will also be capable of any evil and at the same time incapable of seeing that it is evil. This is where the danger of diabolical misuse lurks, for it is this that can once and for all destroy human beings” (*After Ten Years*, edited and introduced by Victoria J. Barnett, Fortress Press, 2017, p.22-23).

Does this sound like it was written for today or what?

So, let's pause and summarize. Stupidity is not about IQ or education. It is sin and related to the deadly sin of sloth, a kind of laziness and indifference that doesn't care enough to do the work of thinking. Slothful thinking/stupidity can also mean that we're too busy to think or it can be we're too tired to think. The result is a kind of blindness. As Bonhoeffer says, no matter what you say, stupidity is blind to anything but what it wants to see and can do evil but see it as good. Stupidity can participate in evil and never even know it. We're oblivious to it while we have our noses in our smartphones or we're mindlessly watching distractions on our screens.

When we view the recent video of a local white cop, in civilian clothes, who did not identify himself, tackling and arresting African-American Stephen F. Austin University female students lingering around an apartment pool after a pool party, and we ask ourselves, “How can anyone not see what happened? It is obvious. Injustice, brutality, racism, by the police is wrong and he and they should

be held accountable!” Yet, police officers and “law-and-order types” see only their unquestionable authority. This is stupidity. It is blindness.

Furthermore, we might be stupid about some things and not about others. Perhaps we know all sorts of things about current politics but we are stupid and blind about our marriage or about our neighbor or about how we see the Christian life. Stupid is easy. It takes work not to be.

Which brings us, finally, to our Scripture lesson for today. John 13-17 is Jesus’ final words to his disciples before he walks out the door to confront the powers of death. Central to what he says is his promise of sending the Holy Spirit to us – sometimes called the Comforter, the Advocate, Counselor, Helper, the Spirit of truth – all meanings related to the word, Paraclete. Three times Jesus refers to the Paraclete as the Spirit of Truth and here, he says, the Paraclete “will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (14:26). Over in chapter 16, he says, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (16:13).

In other words, Jesus is telling us that part of the work of the Holy Spirit is to keep us from being stupid.

At the same time, many of us might be saying, “But we know lots of stupid Christians who are devoted to the Holy Spirit.” True. I know them too. But part of what we’re doing here this morning is to make sure we don’t join them.

The Holy Spirit in our lives is grace – the gift of God. At the same time, to live with the Spirit takes work. We are responsible – able to respond – to God. We are not passive, sitting around hoping that the Spirit of God will drop down out of heaven and lead us to truth. We are called to get up, drop our nets, and follow

Jesus and participate in the work and way of Jesus. The Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, leads us, empowers us, grows us, teaches us, challenges us, and encourages us as we go, as we work. And the Holy Spirit calls us to think; the Spirit of truth urges us to use our minds.

Carrel King's old professor in English Literature in college (Wheaton), Alan Jacobs now teaches in Baylor's Honors Program. Jacobs has a wonderful little book called *How to Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds* (Currency, 2017) in which he says, "Relatively few people want to think. Thinking troubles us; thinking tires us. Thinking can force us out of the familiar, comforting habits; thinking can complicate our lives; thinking can set us at odds, or at least complicate our relationships, with those we admire or follow... Moreover, conscious thinking is *slow*" (p. 17).

The ancients talked about prudence, one of the cardinal virtues, which we usually translate as wisdom. Like any of the virtues, it too is both a gift of the Holy Spirit while also taking work. It is slow. It takes time and perseverance. And while we usually think of wisdom as a kind of intellectual capacity, it has more to do with learning to see differently. If, as Bonhoeffer says, stupidity is blind to anything but what it already sees, prudence is the kind of wisdom that learns to see what needs to be done in specific situations, sees "the world as it really is" (Joseph Pieper).

As you've heard me say many times, the reason in the Gospel stories some see the resurrected Jesus while others do not is because it is the ones who practiced Jesus' teachings (who "worked the program") who were able to see Jesus after his resurrection. Stupid people did not see the resurrected Christ while those who kept

on doing what Jesus showed them to do were able to see him. Those who persevered in practice saw the world as it really is.

Gregory the Great (died 604) noted that Mary Magdalene remained at the tomb on Easter morning while the other disciples ran off. Gregory said, “She persevered in seeking, and so it happened, that she found him” (Gregory the Great, Homily 25).

This raises a pastoral question for me: I encounter people who tell me that God is not real to them anymore and therefore, they’re throwing God aside. They don’t feel God’s presence, and of course, upon inquiry I learn that they no longer come to worship, pray, serve those in need, practice forgiveness, and so on. Sometimes we have doubts, which I remind you, is part and parcel of faith. But sometimes we do not know God because we don’t persevere. We do not practice what Jesus taught us and we become lazy in our thinking and lazy in our living.

There are many other practices to help keep us from stupidity and help us become wise thinkers, but here is one that I want to finish with because it is so essential – becoming wise thinkers is a communal task.

We might say about someone stupid, “They need to learn to think for themselves.” Alan Jacobs counters that instead, we want to learn “to think with different people.” Jacobs says, “to think independently of other human beings is impossible, and if it were possible it would be undesirable. Thinking is necessarily, thoroughly, and wonderfully social. Everything you think is a response to what someone else has thought and said” (p. 37).

The big question is what kind of community helps us think? Like-minded groups, or what I’ll call “in-group” thinking discourages asking uncomfortable

questions and does not like counter perspectives or opinions; does not think “outside the box,” with the “box” being defined by the group. Earlier, I mentioned Hannah Arendt’s warning that stupidity, or “not thinking” as she put it, never leaves the in-group. Nowadays, there is no more powerful in-group than the closed silos of social media.

To save us from stupidity, the answer is not “thinking for ourselves,” which is impossible, but to think with a different community. Alan Jacobs puts it well when he says we want to be “in a fellowship of people who are not so much like-minded as like-hearted” (p. 62).

This is what church is supposed to be – a community who is open and who listens to each other, listens to others, and listens across time and across the globe because we are like-hearted. In other words, we trust God and we trust one another. When we trust, when we are like-hearted, we can listen to perspectives that are different because we know that the other person knows us and loves us, and not just our views. We trust the members of our fellowship will be there for us through thick and thin and we know we’ll be there for them.

This is why our 48-year partnership with Zion Hill First Baptist Church and our new fellowship starting next fall with Iron Wheel Baptist Church are so essential. We are like-hearted but we are not like-minded. We listen and learn to see the world from the perspective of our African-American sisters and brothers in those congregations.

And it is why we learn to listen to voices from history. Jane was in conversation last week with someone about religious liberty and state-mandated religious practices. Jane said, “I’m a Roger Williams kind of Baptist and that

means that I believe in freedom *from* religion as well as freedom of religion.” We are a congregation that knows about and listens to Roger Williams, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Hannah Arendt, and Gregory the Great, as well as Fannie Lou Hamer, and my old mentor Will Campbell, and on and on. The Spirit of truth works through them, even over the centuries, to teach us, challenge us, and call us to think.

This is what I loved and miss about Dr. Bob Carroll (whom we buried five months ago). Bob and I disagreed as much as any two people in this church. At least twice a month he made a beeline to me after the service to argue with me about something I said in my sermon. He’d challenge me and I’d challenge him back. We were not like-minded but we were like-hearted. Each of us would go home and during the week, think about and maybe read and research what the other said. And guess what? Over time, we both changed our minds from time to time. And even when we did not change our minds we learned to think with one another and listen to one another, all because we had learned to love one another.

This is a picture of the Holy Spirit binding our hearts together – making us like-hearted. The Spirit of truth teaches us, guides us to truth but does not necessarily make us like-minded. It makes us like Christ. We learn to think like Jesus. We learn to see like Jesus. We learn to love like Jesus.

That’s the church. That’s a picture of the work of the Spirit of truth keeping us from being stupid.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.