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Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

## QUANTUM TRUTH

You might be surprised to know how often people engage me in theological discussions. OK, maybe you wouldn't be surprised, but it happens everywhere...at coffee shops, at the grocery store, in the line of cars waiting to pick up the kids, at birthday parties and sporting events. I'm just like a lot of ministers, as much as I enjoy the "God talk" that is theology, there are times where I consider not revealing what I do for a living. People sometimes take that as a license to start a pastoral counseling session...I imagine doctors and lawyers and many other professions contend with the same issue. I have considered making up a fake profession - you know, lying to people about what I do - to avoid the potential issues. Maybe astronaut or lead guitarist for a Lynard Skynard tribute band. But then, I am a minister - regardless of what I admit to - and we're supposed to be some kind of a model of behavior. I think that lying is kind of frowned on.

Still, the reason that I think people engage with me so readily is that we are all seeking something. Maybe at different speeds and certainly in different ways, but we're all on the lookout for what I'd like to think is wisdom. And an encounter with a "person of the cloth" is a rare opportunity to connect with someone who is, at least stereotypically, supposed to know about seeking wisdom. More typically, though, I find that what we're really seeking is answers. The very witty columnist Dave Barry once wrote, "People who want to share their religious views with you, almost never want you to share yours with them." But what this quote highlights is not our inability to communicate civilly, though that is in a state of major disrepair, it is pointing out how so many of our religious conversations are about answers, not about questions. When we gather to talk about faith, what seems to happen is that we talk about truth...at least truth the way we see it. Certainly fundamentalism has played a major role in this shift, with its insistence on certain fundamentals of religion, but we in

the non-fundamentalist, progressive church play the same game. We have developed a doctrine of no doctrines; litmus tests for people every bit as strenuous as the fundamentalists. Heck, even atheists are playing the game. Listen to Richard Dawkins or Bill Maher go on rants for awhile and you begin to see what could be called "fundamental atheism", if such a thing is possible.

The issue is not styles of communication or methods of dialogue; it is at a more basic level. The issue is whether or not we think that we can have a stranglehold on truth. This is why people who want to share their religious opinion don't really want to hear yours...it messes with their truth. More often than not religion preaches faith but teaches certainty. But to be a person of faith is to be a doubter...it is to live always with the idea that you might be wrong. It doesn't mean that we don't speak with passion; it just means that we don't speak with certainty. That's why we are faithful people and not certain people. We believe that God works in mysterious ways and we trust that even though we may not be able to quantifiably record or detect God's action that it is occurring nonetheless.

I happen to think that one of the wisest statements that a person of faith can make is "I don't know". But most of us have grown up with something else. Raised in a fundamentalist atmosphere – even if you didn't attend a fundamentalist church – we all got exposed to the extreme dedication to Luther's idea that all we need is the Bible. We've all seen those TV shows with names like "Bible Truths" and the "Answers to Your Bible Questions", usually hosted by a learned looking scholarly grandfather type named the Rev. Dr. Something. Whether we bought those shows or not, the culture presents an idea that this is how it works...you've got problems? The Bible has solutions! There is right and wrong, black and white, problems and solutions...and it's all in the Bible. Every question has ONE answer.

Bishop Yvette Flunder talks about this standard dogmatic equation in a sermon recounting her own fundamentalist background – a sermon that some of you may have seen snippets of in the Living the Questions DVD series. She says, "I was raised in a binary construct. There was black and white...right and wrong. And once we found our right answer, if you didn't agree with it...you were going to hell. Period. Do not pass go, do not collect 200 dollars." She goes on to talk about this binary construct...how things are one way or the other and that if she was right then that meant you were wrong. Flunder may have left this binary system in her own theological journey, but I'm afraid that this is the construct that permeates every pore of our culture...especially religion, and it shows us the down side of answers to our questions. Once I have my answer, yours needs to look pretty similar or someone is in trouble.

Look, don't get me wrong...I have no issue with answers. Answers have their place. When someone is diagnosed with a rare and life-threatening disease or you are told that your child has autism, answers are a good thing. When your car is making that strange clicking sound or if your kid is coming home at midnight instead of 11, you want some answers. Answers are OK. But don't seek wisdom and settle for answers. Because, as Bishop Flunder has discovered, from a faith perspective answers are temporarily satisfying but they require a lot of ancillary support if that's where we stop. Wisdom is something else.

This passage from Proverbs evokes a whole subsection of both Judaism and Christianity...the wisdom tradition of the Jewish Bible and the John tradition of the New Testament. Both of these paths look to wisdom as the guide, wisdom as the source and wisdom as the creator standing alongside God. So, the next question seems to be, what do we think of wisdom? Wisdom isn't knowledge. Wisdom isn't binary...it isn't about right or wrong as much as it is about awareness. Wisdom is something beyond just knowing something. It is not found in knowledge but rather in practice. Information, facts, data, even comprehension are all part of wisdom, but oftentimes wisdom is found more in our surrender to what we don't know than in anything we do know.

Proverbs teaches us that wisdom has three faces. First, the face of passed down, instructional wisdom – things like "Well done is better than well said" or "What goes around, comes around". These aren't concrete standardized rules, they are loose guidelines that help to shepherd us along our way. They aren't statements of right versus wrong, they are the sharing of lived experience. The second face is that of personified wisdom, seen as *hokmah* in Hebrew, the feminine companion of God who is adapted by the New Testament authors to refer to Jesus as wisdom enfleshed. And then third there is the face of wisdom as co-creator of the universe – the very foundational principle of creation.

Wisdom has a face, a voice and substance. Wisdom calls on us in this passage to embrace what is true and to a right understanding of the Creator and creation. And here's where this discussion gets messy and where I think that we get hung up...it's that word truth. When we talk of "truth", I get nervous because I think that truth is pretty subjective. How you see truth is colored a great deal by who you are, your culture and viewpoints and your level and kind of education. To many that would make me a moral relativist. But I don't think that truth is relevant, I think that we are. Just as I emphasize that when we talk of God, when we do theology which is literally "God talk", we use metaphors because we have no other way of talking about God.

I doubt that there would be many Christians who would disagree with the idea that God is truth. Yet if we know God to be ultimately unknowable, why would

we not say the same thing about truth? My great grandfather probably thought that slavery was a normal part of life. It was truth for him and since he fought for the Confederacy I'll have to assume that it was true enough for him to die defending. I am just as sure today that slavery is not the truth of life. So what has changed? Has truth changed or have we?

Science used to accept that matter could only exist in one form at a time. But quantum physics has now discovered that matter can be both particles and waves – at the same time. Does that mean that matter has changed, or have we just learned something new? If that is true, what other newness is out there waiting to be revealed? It kind of makes you wonder about what we hold as truth, doesn't it?

Just before I decided to go to seminary we started a new class here at Mayflower. It was a Bible study class and we met in the evenings. It was led by a retired Disciples minister and member here...a man by the name of David Reece. David was a gem of a guy and his wisdom was relentless. One of the primary struggles that we dealt with in this class was how to contend (as progressive thinkers) with people in our lives who were more dogmatic, more conservative, more absolute than we were, especially in regards to the Bible and theology...you know, those people that Dave Barry was talking about.

David had great advice that I may never forget. He didn't teach us systematic counters for all of the routines we would get shoved in our faces with some frequency. He didn't tell us, if they say this, then you say this. He gave us a technique. He said, "When someone tells you that if you don't believe in the Virgin Birth then you're going to hell, say back to them, hmmm...tell me more about that." See, David knew that when you were dealing with answer people, questions were very problematic. It usually brought the confrontation to an end by about the third question.

David's method is disarming because it does two things – it chips away at the other person's usually poorly constructed house of cards. But it also begins to chip away at your own weak construction. Because the more that you use this wise method, the more chance that you will encounter someone who has thought things through and their beliefs, you might find, begin to infiltrate a bit into yours. This method of asking questions requires that the other person question themselves, but it also asks you to be open to their answers. And that is good because if you are not open to being changed, you're not having a discussion anyway.

David taught me that truth is something to be investigated and that questions are far more important than answers. He taught me that knowledge is static, but wisdom is flexible. This search for wisdom is not a destination, it is the

journey itself. We might arrive at moments of truth but they are just stones that we step on as if we were crossing the stream. Think about how many things you once knew to be absolutely true that have now changed. When we are dedicated to answers instead of living the questions, we will eventually become distraught. For there aren't always answers in life and sometimes even the answers we have get turned around, disproved or become in some other way unsatisfying.

A woman I was visiting once told me, "I want to believe that God understands me". She was very frustrated and told me that she didn't really know how Jesus proved that God understood her. "After all", she told me, "he couldn't have know what it is like to be a woman". "You know", she continued, "I remember thinking when I was about 13 that I was so alone, and when my parents told me that Jesus was with me no matter what, I wondered how he could know what it was like to have a period, or to be teased for my dress, or to be shamed for where I lived". She paused for a long time and then said, "Every morning I stare into the mirror and I see an old woman staring back. And I'm tired of people treating me like I'm a frail old woman. How can I reassure myself that Jesus is with me when he died as a 33 year old male? "

It is times like these that theology is both your worst enemy and your best friend. I told her that Jesus as a human being could only sympathize with her as he could with the hemorrhaging woman, but that what we believed about Jesus was not that he was God, but rather that he represents God with us...that while he may not have shared our particular experience of humanity, he did experience the same frail humanity we all live with each day. He experienced weakness and shame, pain and humiliation, grief and longing, hope and despair. He may not have had our unique experience, but he did have what is common to us all – a human experience.

You know, that was as close to Trinitarianism as I have ever come...that Jesus was God in the way that he related to human beings and the way that he was human. The best example of humanity and the closest example of divinity were known in this figure of Jesus Christ....our humanity and God's divinity are related somehow, and Jesus let us see that. So, I told her, God is not found apart from your life, but in it. The next time you look in that mirror, I told her, you are seeing an expression of God enfleshed in broken humanity.

I don't think that I came up with that answer myself. That was the third part of that Trinitarian formula at work, if you ask me. And it was an example of wisdom. It wasn't really an answer. I didn't solve her problem or tell her that there was good news, Jesus was once a 13 year old girl and an old woman...I simply set before her something else to think about. Often that is far more satisfying than any answer.

I am amazed that the older I get and the more I learn, the less I know. I guess that I should say the less I am willing to say that I know. I'm just less and less comfortable with that term – “I know”. Just as I am less and less comfortable with truth. It is like a live snake to me now – intriguing but dangerous...something that must be handled with great respect and care. It's no wonder that an ancient symbol for wisdom was the snake.

But I have found that though I am less and less comfortable with truth, I am far more at ease. I have more peace and more security in my relationship with God than I have ever had. And perhaps I just said why. Perhaps it is because of those endless questions that I am more engaged in the relationship. And the more I practice Christianity, the more I believe that relationship is the central point.

It's the only way that I have any use for the doctrine of the Trinity – God and Jesus and Spirit all inter-related and yet expressions of the same thing. God as transcendently great, imminently present and mysteriously available...all sides of the same coin...a strange, three-sided coin. But hey, the Trinity is not really an answer, it's more of a question...

Frankly I've found more wisdom in my life in conversations and in interaction with others than by any other source. I have found more wisdom in my grandmother cooking in the kitchen than in a thousand theology books – and believe me, I've read a thousand theology books.

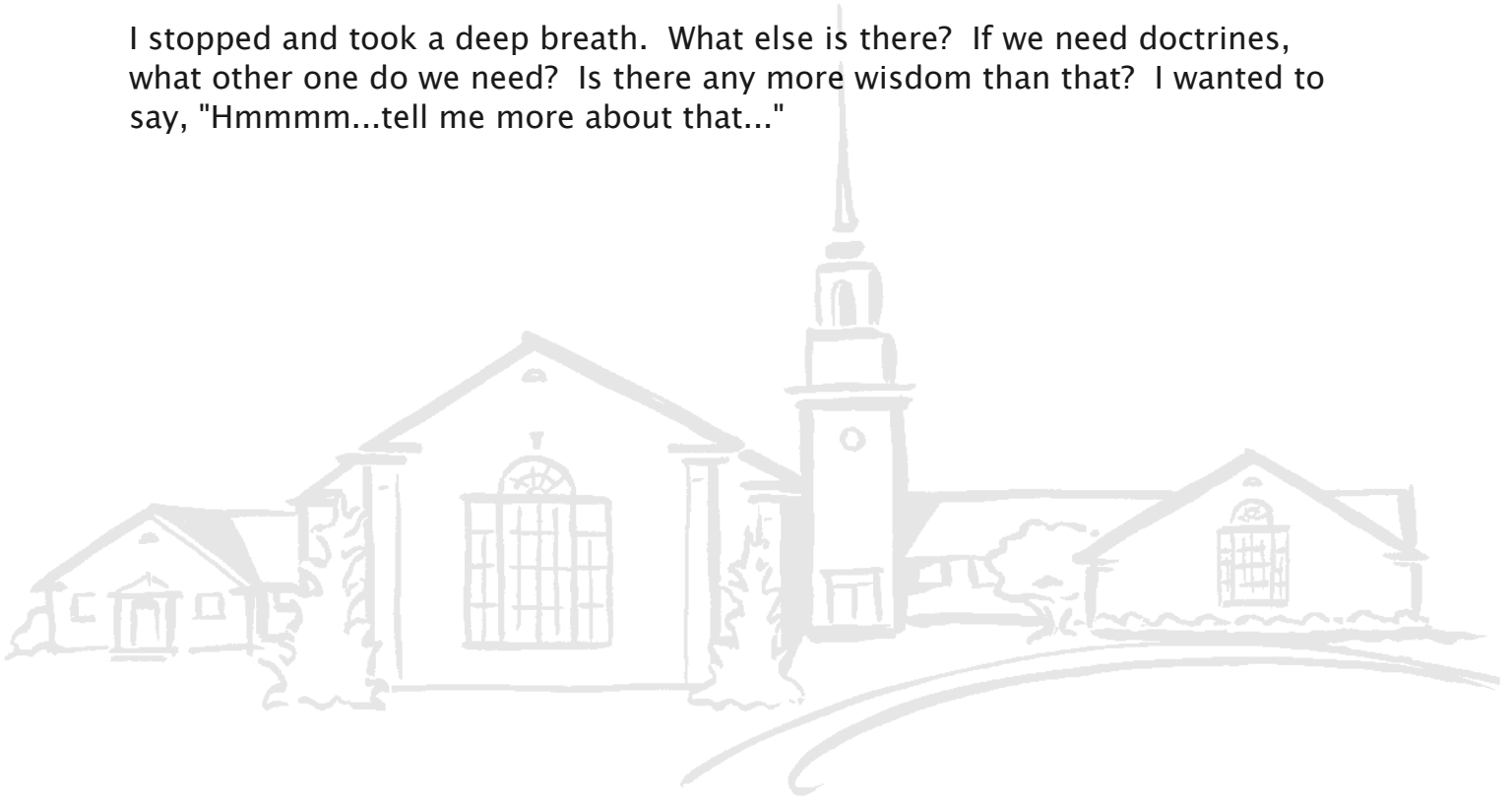
Last year I went the Conference annual meeting in Wichita. Now ordinarily, we tend to spend our time arguing over administrative details, splitting hairs on the slightest point which we argue as if we were defending our virtue itself. I often leave feeling much sadder than when I arrived and conclude that it is no wonder that people are leaving religion in groves in search of something spiritual.

But last year there was a shift. As we prepared to do what many denominations and churches are doing, namely cut the budget and try to maintain some sense of connection to our ideals of fair wages and decent staff capacity for the stated ministries of the conference, the youth of the conference staged a small coup. It wasn't a surprise coup, we knew in advance of a resolution they would be presenting on making this next year in the life of the conference be the “year of the youth”. What was unanticipated was the wisdom that their simple presentation would reveal.

They started a business session with a short worship service – songs, some short addresses by the kids themselves and then they closed with a simple prayer...a body prayer where they matched hand movements to words. As they pointed to the sky with their index finger, they said, “May your Love, O God,

be...”, then they pointed to their foreheads and said, “in our minds”, pointed to their mouths and said, “on our lips”, and finally pointed to their chest and said, “and in our hearts”. Then they met their hands together in a prayer gesture and ended with, “as we live that into the world, today and always.”

I stopped and took a deep breath. What else is there? If we need doctrines, what other one do we need? Is there any more wisdom than that? I wanted to say, “Hmmm...tell me more about that...”



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