

WISE FOOLS

I CORINTHIANS 1: 18-25

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University Church of Chicago

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When John Updike died several weeks ago, we lost one of our most prolific novelists/poets/essayists who wrote from a deeply Christian perspective about the three realities that matter most to Americans: sex, money and death. Updike grew up in a devout Lutheran home in Pennsylvania, and although he was the quintessential *New Yorker* writer, he lived most of his adult life in semi-rural Massachusetts, where he was a very active member of a United Church of Christ congregation (where he served on the church's Board) but always drawn inexorably to the liturgy of the Episcopal Church.

Having read Updike somewhat avidly since the publication of his first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair*, I have been both intrigued and chagrined at the way he depicts pastors, but that's a subject for another sermon. His most popular books, the *Rabbit* novels, a quartet that depict Harry Angstrom, a used-car salesman who hops around like a sexed-up American bunny, trying to figure out who he is and what his life means, reflect on our Puritan culture and our innate hypocrisy.

In the four novels, written over a period of some twenty years, we follow Harry Angstrom, who people call Rabbit, from being a fleet-footed high-school basketball star through marriage, fatherhood, adultery disappointment, some success selling cars and illness. Rabbit Angstrom is a kind of Everyman.

In the last of the four novels, *Rabbit at Rest*, Harry stares death in the face and refuses to minimize its horror. In a lunch conversation with his former business associate Charlie Stavros just before Harry's date with a surgeon for open-heart surgery, Charlie attempts to comfort Harry with the story of his own successful by-pass operation. But the more Charlie talks about what the doctors did to him, the more disturbed Harry becomes. Charlie describes all the things the doctors do to a person during the operation. Harry is horrified at the thought that while he is unconscious during the surgery, he is nothing more than a machine pumping blood. Charlie insists, "What else do you think you are, champ?"

Well, Rabbit Angstrom, ex-champion high school basketball star and retired sales manager for Toyota's Spring Motors, thinks he is: "A God-made one of a kind with an immortal soul breathed in. A vehicle of grace. A battlefield of good and evil. An apprentice angel. All those things they tried to teach you in Sunday school or really didn't try very hard to teach you, just let them drift in out of the pamphlets back there in that church basement buried deeper in his mind than an air-raid shelter."

So Harry opts for angioplasty rather than by-pass surgery. He begins to run toward death. He has an affair with his daughter-in-law. He fulfills a lifelong ambition and drives alone to Florida. He proves that he is still able to play basketball with the boys.

Thus, one bright sunny morning Harry arrives at a Florida basketball court, spots a talented, muscular black teenager shooting baskets by himself, and challenges the boy to a game of one-on-one. Harry knows—he *must* know—that he can't win, but he insists on playing the kid. So, he makes some shots, and then he grabs the ball and leaps high. Only this time his "torso is ripped by a terrific pain elbow to elbow. He bursts from within; he feels something immense persistently fumble at him, and falls unconscious to the dirt."

Later in the hospital, his last breath imminent, Harry manages to hear his son Nelson shouting with grief and despair, "Don't die, Dad, *don't!*" Harry realizes that the boy needs help in facing the worst that any of us can face. Caringly, compassionately, assuringly, he utters his final, hopeful, life-consoling words: "Well, Nelson, all I can tell you is, it isn't so bad."

It is to the Harry Angstroms of the world that St. Paul is writing in the First Letter to the Corinthians. And to us, North Americans who live in an increasingly secular culture, one which it was revealed in a new survey this past week that our young people are less and less interested in religion, more Americans consider themselves without any religious faith at all and mainline denominations like Presbyterians, Disciples, Methodists and Congregationalists are losing members and influence at a frightening pace.

In the midst of the secular cacophony of both the first and the twenty-first centuries, Paul tells us how foolish our faith appears to those secular people who surround us. "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" (v. 18). Corinth was the Chicago of the first-century Mediterranean world; it was noted for its corruption, fast living, quick money. It served as a transportation nexus, the nouveau riche entrepreneurs who pocketed immense profits and its lascivious rituals at the famed temple of Aphrodite.

In today's lection from the Hebrew Bible, we hear the Covenant God speaks on Sinai, and it begins with a penetrating command: "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol...You shall not bow down to (idols) or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God" (Exodus 20: 1,2,5). The Ten Commandments, as we so easily characterize that passage, lays out the ways God expects us to respond to infinite, divine grace.

Do you remember the story about the pastor who preached on all ten of the Ten Commandments in one sermon? The pastor harangued and harassed his congregation mercilessly for a good forty-five minutes as he meticulously dissected the entire Decalogue. At the conclusion of the service, a thoroughly beaten-up parishioner came out of the sanctuary, shook the pastor's hand limply, and said, "Well, at least I haven't made any graven images."

True enough. But that is not what idolatry is primarily about. Our idolatry—yours and mine—is much more sophisticated and evil than making pagan images. An idol is anything, anyone, any idea, any entity that takes first place both in our imagination and in our priorities. The Ten Commandments begin with that prohibition on idol-making because God knows that we are always tempted to worship—that is, to put in first place in our lives—things other than loyalty to God.

Similarly, an addiction can be defined as anything that you use to fill up the empty spaces in your life. Where do you feel empty, alone, afraid? How do you cope with those feelings? By drinking too much, eating too much, spending too much, watching too much TV, shopping?

So, what or who is most important, takes first place among your loyalties? What in your life can you not do without? The temptation for the preacher here is to moralize, to bombard you with “should” and “oughts.” But that kind of cheap moralizing cheapens the equation, begs the question. God never does that. Jesus never once moralized, used the word ought or should or must. That’s not what the faith is about.

What we need is a new hypothesis. The old presupposition is the world’s wisdom that death is the end of the story. The cross does not deny the reality of death. It reinforces it. But it denies its finality. When we mourn the death of a loved one, realize firsthand that our life is short and fleeting, or witness tragedies like September 11, 2001, we are tempted to put up walls of avoidance, find ways to distract from our fears. Instead of facing death, we talk about our need for self-preservation. The false wisdom of the world tries to protect us from the inevitability of death.

Our reaction to the surveys that show fewer people embracing religion and more becoming skeptical about the role of the church is to cry out, “We need more volunteers!” or “What can we do to appear more successful?” or “How can we balance the church budget so that we can be rescued from another year of financial peril?”

But here’s the truth. Everyone of us is perishing, but everyone of us can be saved by God’s love. The perishing is *our* doing. The saving is *God’s* doing. The surprising, ultimate power of the cross is that God says no to the apparent logic that everything moves toward death. Jesus does not rage against death. He embraces his suffering and death, because he knows that the final word is not death, but new life. Death is the entry point into the saving power of God.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells of her traumatic first semester as a student at Yale Divinity School. There were no catastrophic events to speak of, but she was farther away from home than she had ever been, everyone seemed to speak a foreign language, and “I was not even sure why I was there. I was dreadfully lonely, and afraid, and desperate for some answers.”

Next door to the Divinity School on the highest hill in New Haven stood an old deserted Victorian mansion. The sagging porch was overcome with weeds, the slate shingles were crumbling off the roof, and all the doors and windows were boarded up. A metal fire escape ran up one side for a full three stories and ended in a little metal platform outside an attic dormer window. The whole place was plastered with No Trespassing signs and the campus police patrolled it regularly.

At the end of her rope, Barbara decided one night that if she braved all her fears—including a considerable fear of heights—and climbed up there to the top, perhaps she would be able to pray a prayer that would win an answer. So she did, one shaky step at a time. She arrived at the top with her heart in her throat. It was extraordinarily beautiful up there, and she could see all the way to Long Island Sound, where the nearly full moon made glitter out of the water and through all the treetops in

between she could see street lights and shop lights and porch lights winking through the leaves. A strong wind blew off the sound, a salty wind that gusted through the eaves of the old house and made it creak.

Once the edge of her fear was gone, Barbara began her prayer, asking God to reveal the divine purpose to her, to point her in the right direction, to give her a sign. It was a pretty good prayer as formal prayers go, but she did not hear or feel any answers. So she tried again, getting angrier and angrier as she did. What good was God if God would not answer a simple prayer? She talked and talked at God until the words ran out, and then to her great surprise she heard herself singing—or chanting, really, something between plainsong and the howl of a dog answering a siren.

No words came out, just mournful sounds that seemed finally to say what was on her heart, and when she came to the end she had what she wanted.

She had expected a fortune cookie answer to her prayers. “Take the next boat to Samoa and dig latrines in Pago Pago.” But the answer she got was the deep conviction she was loved and what she was called to do was love back “in whatever way allowed me to love the best and most—as a housewife and mother, a nuclear physicist, a gas station attendant, an ordained minister. The specifics did not seem to matter to God. What mattered were my relationships and the love in them, chief among which was my relationship to God.”

Paul uses the phrase “being saved” in this passage. That’s a phrase I use with a great deal of hesitation. More than a few in this congregation feel a kinship with my trepidation about “being saved.” When the visiting evangelist used the phrase in First Methodist Church in DeWitt, Arkansas during the annual Spring Revival—which didn’t revive anyone that I could identify and did not bring any hitherto unsaved sinners to the mourners’ bench—he meant that we would either be saved or burn in hell forever. We would be saved and live in heaven with Jesus. But what he didn’t talk about was that salvation really means being saved from our former, cramped little lives of selfishness and saved for the broad, roomy, loving discipleship of the cross.

George McLeod, the founder of the Iona Community in Scotland, put the power of God in the cross in famous words: “I simply argue that the Cross should be raised at the center of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town’s garbage heap; at a crossroads so cosmopolitan they had to write his title in Hebrew and Latin and Greek...at the kind of place where cynics talk smut and thieves curse and soldiers gamble. Because that is where He died. And that is what He died about. That is where church people ought to be and what church people ought to be about.”