



SUNDAY SERMON

The Gift of Reason

I begin with a scene from the 12th century. It is a class at the Cathedral School in Paris on the close of what would later become the Cathedral of Notre Dame. The teacher is the renowned priest, Peter Abelard, known, if at all to us, because of his scandalous love affair with Heloise, but famous as well for his then unorthodox teachings. His classroom is always packed, full of eager students, but critics as well - lining the back wall, waiting to trap him.

Here's the scene: Peter Abelard poses a question: "How do we...know what the great and almighty God, in his eternal wisdom, wants for Jerusalem?"

After a silence, a voice pipes up from the back of the room: "Holy Mother Church tells us, through her spokesman, the Holy Father."

This prompts the teacher, giving him exactly the cue he needs for that day's teaching: "We know by listening?" he asks, "Not by thinking?" "Listening to what we are told? Are we made for our ears, and not our minds...and intellectual conclusions based on thought? What is the point of troubling to construct an argument, and to follow where it leads, if all we need is the answer from above?"

The critic comes back at him: "The answer from above is certain. What you offer is uncertain...half-truths, not the Truth"

At this, Abelard soars in his rhetoric, his thinking, his theology. He cares nothing for disembodied Truth, with a capital T, but goes on, "There are only grounded truths...the grounded truth of one man. The Word become flesh...God in one man. One cut of meat! The meat of the reasoning human mind. Jesus Christ, yes. Of course. But not only him!"

Pressing his hands to his head, the teacher continues: "Here is the Word made flesh. In every one of us! Here we have the Incarnation in all its glory. The conscious human mind, the knower aware of his own knowing...what do we have but the Real Presence of the ineffable God, who, by virtue of this Incarnation is no longer ineffable!...Half truths are all we ever have...we poor humans do not possess the capital T Truth! We are pilgrims, ever on the way to it. And the mode of pilgrimage...is thought."

Again the voice from the rear: "No! Faith!"

And the teacher's retort: "Faith that thinks!"

I've adapted this scene somewhat from a wonderful historical novel I read this summer, *The Cloister*, by James Carroll. Carroll is known especially for *Constantine's Sword*, his non-fiction history of anti-semitism's roots in Christianity. In his novel, Carroll does trace the passionate love story of Peter Abelard and Heloise. Their forbidden love was hugely costly to them both, and although Carroll portrays all of that, he uses it almost as a vehicle for teaching

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DATE

Pentecost 17
Sunday, Sept. 16, 2018

PREACHER

The Rev. Susan Flanders

Proverbs 1:20-33

Mark 8:27-38

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about Peter Abelard's theology, his commitment to the use of reason as a gift from God. Abelard was rejected in this at the time, but his strand of thinking has always been there, lurking beneath absolute Church doctrines that demanded reliance only on scripture, and even that only as mediated through the authority of the Church - handed down with the insistence that believers rely only on faith. And the content of that faith was to be what the church said it was.

This made Peter Abelard angry and crazy, much as it does many of us today. This must be particularly and poignantly true for many of our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters as they struggle with Church authority in the face of recurrent scandals. What does reason contribute to faith, and how can we ignore this? Isn't the wisdom that comes from reasoning as important, or perhaps more so, than blind dependence on revelation?

It seems that the author of Proverbs, so many centuries before Abelard, makes a similar point in his treatise on Wisdom that we heard a few minutes ago. I'm here pretty much equating Wisdom with Reason, as it so often depends on it. In this passage, Wisdom is personified as a prophet, a prophet who cries in the streets against foolishness and against those who hate knowledge. "How long O simple ones, will you love being simple?" Wisdom threatens those who have ignored her (and I note that she is portrayed as feminine). "Waywardness kills the simple, and the complacency of fools destroys them," she warns, while "those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster." Reason and wisdom are called for; they can save us from disaster - at least that's the promise here.

My thinking about this passage connected not only with Peter Abelard, but then, unexpectedly, with a current book I've just read for a theological book group. This book is *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*, by Steven Pinker. Here too, the importance of reason is highlighted, from the very first quotation on the front page from Baruch Spinoza: "Those who are governed by reason desire nothing for themselves which they do not also desire for the rest of humankind." It's a long book, some 450 pages, and so to summarize it in a sermon is kind of hopeless, but what Pinker has to say about the role of reason gives cause for optimism - something in very short supply these days.

In chapter after chapter, Pinker makes the case that ever since the Enlightenment of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, our world has become a better place and that people's lives continue to get better. He visits a whole range of categories in which he claims we have made progress: health, food supply, wealth, inequality, peace, safety, democracy, equal rights, and even the environment. This is not glib, feel-good assurance. He acknowledges the very real problems and threats we face in such areas as the environment, but he shifts the perspective here. Pinker's recurring claim, in the face of, say, global warming, is that we can actually trust in our capacity to deal with this threat, thanks to our reason, our ability, demonstrated throughout history, to address problems and move - even if ever so slowly or in sudden leaps and tragic relapses - towards a better quality of life for more and more people. We can trust this capacity because of our reason - our ability to think clearly and objectively. When we abandon this - or turn against Wisdom as our strength, then we are in trouble. To make his case for optimism, Pinker wants to trust reason, science and humanism, all enlightenment values, to move the world forward. Pinker pushes this to the point that he rejects theism - the belief in God as an actual being, removed from the natural world - in favor of humanism, and he offers several cogent arguments for doing so. For him, the belief in God as an actual being is inconsistent with reason, and surely this has been a struggle for many believers. It has been for me, and I suspect for many of you. How can we honor both reason and belief?

The Episcopal Church, some years back had some great posters out there to appeal to unchurched folks. One of these proclaimed: "The Episcopal Church: Where you don't have to check your reason at the door," and that's certainly something that spoke to me when I became an Episcopalian after ten years of staying away from church altogether. We Episcopalians

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also base our faith on a three legged stool model - scripture, tradition and reason. Like any three legged stool, it cannot stand without all three legs, and all three have equal value, all three are gifts to us in the quest of faith.

I am open to mysticism; I've had experiences of what I would call the holy, and I know that faith can take us beyond reason. But as I do believe in God, I've had to come to terms with the limits my own reason sets on my theology and reading of scripture. I cannot prove the existence of God, but I need to have a sense of God that is consistent with reason. So where I've come with this is a belief in God as an inhabiting, embracing mystery, part of all that is, yet also transcendent, beyond. Another way I believe in God is as the power of love in the world, present in countless ways that we can and do experience, and so, very real. These are beliefs, not sure knowledge, but for me, not inconsistent with reason.

When it comes to Jesus, scripture and tradition give us so much, but again, I persist in wanting what I think about Jesus to be reasonable. With Peter Abelard, I see Jesus as Word made Flesh - the conscious human mind as part of how God is incarnate in Jesus, and incarnate in us. We need to use our minds to the best we can, not live in a false dichotomy between faith and reason - they need to be in service to one another.

And here's where the gospel might come in - or one way of thinking about it. What if reason is not only a gift, but also our cross to bear - the thing we must take up if we are to follow Jesus, not blind faith? Reason is indeed a gift, perhaps unique to us humans, certainly a wonderful tool for making sense of the world. But using, trusting and following where reason takes us can be difficult, painful, even scary. Sometimes it's easier to deny the voice of reason. When we hear of global warming leading towards possible catastrophe - denial or at least discounting, can be easier. When someone we know shows all the signs of addiction - denial, or at least discounting can be easier. Years ago, my family and I did this with my brother, easier at the time, but costly for all of us. When a chorus of credible voices speak up about disfunction, dishonesty and lack of curiosity and understanding in the halls of power - denial, or at least discounting, can be easier.

Whenever the voice of reason, no matter how still, or how small whispers to us that something is seriously wrong, don't we have to pay attention? Don't we have to look closely at what we face, pay attention to those with more knowledge or expertise than we have, sure, but then use our own brains and not follow blindly in ways that seem wrongheaded. And all of that can feel like picking up a huge cross and lugging it around, borne down by its weight, feeling our very lives to be threatened. We want to save our lives, protect things the way they are whenever we're comfortable and secure - but reason can tell us we're losing what we value unless we face into the truth of our situations.

When we do, when we lift high the cross of reason and follow where it leads, that way may be through loss and pain and sacrifice - it may certainly be through change. But that cross may also save our lives. Jesus' cross led through torture and death to new life. And we call the Friday of his death "good" and his cross our gift. The same with reason - a gift, but one that can sometimes feel like a cross. May we bear it well and use it as best we can. May we deny foolishness, accept the burdens of reason and, in so doing, as Jesus promises, save our lives.
Amen