

Humble pie goes down hard; the truth can be hard to swallow, especially when the truth is that we’re not who we thought we were; to be who we aspire to be, we have to do what we never imagined we could, would, or should do.

The truth turns our world upside down; this always comes as a surprise, but we were warned. Jesus said, *Matthew 5:3–6 (NRSV)* “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”*

Paul keeps us off balance when he writes: *1 Corinthians 1:18 (NRSV)* *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.*

Humble pie goes down hard; the truth can be hard to swallow, but if we have the stomach for it, the truth will set us free.

I believe that the present predicament that the Church in America finds itself in is a heaping helping of humble pie ala mode. Christians are perceived as judgmental, hypocritical, hateful, yet an article I read last year said that while the young adults interviewed had an unfavorable view of Christians, they did have a favorable image of Jesus. It is easy to judge those who judge us, but if we dare to be meek, humble, and teachable, our hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled. These young adults can lead us.

The spiritual struggle between truth and falsehood, wisdom and folly, is eloquently described in the Doobie Brothers classic, “What a Fool Believes:” “what a fool believes he sees, No wise man has the power to reason away, What seems to be Is always better than nothing There's nothing at all But what a fool believes he sees.”<sup>1</sup>

✦ “No Wise Man Has the Power to Reason Away”

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Paul writes to the Corinthians because the gospel wasn’t front and center; it wasn’t the truth that set them free. The good news is that the death of Jesus on the cross and his subsequent resurrection from the dead shows that he is the Lord, the Savior of the world. Through Jesus God is making all things new; but, the Corinthians

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<sup>1</sup> <http://songmeanings.com/songs/view/3530822107858571600/>

were the first though not the last to reason that away. In their minds, they weren't being saved because of what God had done; they were being saved because they knew better, they were better, they deserved it; they were spiritually elite; they were “the wise man with the power to reason away.”

Being “holier than thou” has a long and unfortunate and ongoing history in the Church. It is a constant temptation to turn our faith into a reason to judge our neighbor rather than giving thanks that by grace we can stand in God's judgment because Jesus Christ was judged on our behalf. We confuse “knowing Jesus” with “knowing better.” In the name of what “we know” we turn on one another rather than turning to one another. We condemn. We divide. “It's the right thing to do,” we tell ourselves and those of like-mind. We should know. We're the wise man with the power to reason away.

Perhaps you are thinking: He's talking about this issue, or perhaps that one; he's venturing dangerously close to the hot buttons, where is he going with this?

I realize I'm close to going from preaching to meddling, but this sermon isn't about an agenda; it's about an attitude; an attitude that negates the gospel. People find it hard to believe in Jesus because they see and hear so little of him in us. “If that's what Jesus is like, I want no parts of him,” they say; and even more poignantly, “I'd like to know what Jesus is like, but I can't take what you say seriously because of what you do. You judge. You condemn. When you “hate the sin, but love the sinner,” it sounds like you hate the sinner too.”

Our attitude negates the gospel, because we know better.

Contrast that attitude with what Scripture teaches:

*Matthew 5:7–9 (NRSV) “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God”.*

*1 Corinthians 1:25 (NRSV) For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

*1 Corinthians 1:27–29 (NRSV) ... God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose*

*what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.*

*Micah 6:8 (NRSV) He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

Humble pie goes down hard; it is hard to consider that as well-meaning and as faithful as we are, our attitude is getting in the gospel's way. Pay attention. Pay attention to what you say, what you think, and what you do. Pay attention, and when the ways we are in the way come to the surface, the ways that we are "holier than thou," remember that it is the meek who inherit the earth, that it is the foolishness of the cross that is the salvation of the world; that the gospel questions our certainties and quiets our doubts. The wise man has the power to reason away, but what a fool believes he sees.

#### ✦ What a Fool Believes

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Pete Seeger offered us an example of a fool who believes. Seeger, who died this week, always had an agenda; his songs supported workers rights, opposed the Vietnam War, urged environment protection, and sustained the Civil Rights movement in believing, "We Shall Overcome"

Some agreed with him; some disagreed with him, but watching him on YouTube this week, I was struck by his attitude. He was joyful. He was hopeful. He emblazoned his banjo with the words, "This Machine Surrounds Hate and Forces It to Surrender."<sup>2</sup> His obituary in the NY Times concluded: "Through the years, Mr. Seeger remained determinedly optimistic. "The key to the future of the world," he said in 1994, "is finding the optimistic stories and letting them be known."<sup>3</sup>

Agree with his politics or not, but consider his attitude: positive, hopeful, having a point of view but holding it in such a way that there is room to sing along even if we don't agree. Doesn't that sound more like Jesus than some of the things we've heard Christians say; than some of the things we've said? Doesn't that sound like the kind of church we'd like to belong to?

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<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pete\\_Seeger](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pete_Seeger)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/29/arts/music/pete-seeger-songwriter-and-champion-of-folk-music-dies-at-94.html>

So how do we get there? How do we keep our attitudes from getting in the way of the gospel? *1 Corinthians 1:31 (NRSV)* “*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.*” Celebrate what God has chosen to do as what God has chosen to do.

Remember that God’s choice illustrates our weakness, not our spiritual strength, so we have no right to look down on anyone else. What we do have is the opportunity to witness to what a fool believes.

The following prayer of Thomas Merton, who would have been 99 this week, gives us a sample of what we sound like when we have the attitude of a fool who believes:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen. (Thomas Merton)

Humble pie goes down hard, but the truth will set us free. “Holier than thou” is not the way. We know better than to believe that what matters is that we know better. The gospel questions our certainties and quiets our doubts; we don’t have all the answers; we’re not supposed to; that’s God’s business. We have the opportunity to witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in a positive, hopeful way that gives our neighbor room to believe in Jesus even when we disagree about what’s right and what’s wrong. Let go of being “holier than thou” by remembering the most important thing of all: The gospel; Jesus on the cross; Jesus emerging from the tomb; Jesus seated at the right hand of God to judge the living and the dead. The gospel is what a fool believes. Amen.