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The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

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We Have the Mind of Christ



Walker Percy is a lesser known name of 20th century American authors, but someone who deserves, even today, more than passing attention. After coming down with tuberculosis and spending several months convalescing in a sanatorium Upstate, where he read and reflected on his life, Percy dropped out of Columbia Med School in the 40's to become a novelist, effectively trading his stethoscope for a pen. He didn't leave medicine behind, so much as he changed the way he would seek to diagnose and treat the illness – for him, it would be through novels. Deeply formed by the existentialist tradition, Percy was interested in how modern people experience their lives as one of exile, which he saw as a natural by-product of living in a technocratic society. As societies become more and more dependent on technologies, their citizens forfeit their ability to interact with the real, three-dimensional world; jobs and knowledge itself become increasingly specialized – organized around the most sought-after technologies – and life becomes more and more compartmentalized as these select technologies require select knowledge and skilled technique to operate.

About modern humanity, Percy would say: we've become smarter in our theories about life, but we've lost the art living well. While technologies are wonderful at closing distances, and saving time, they disembody us, making us live from the neck up - we take on faith that those we are in a Zoom meeting with actually have bodies and aren't just talking heads. So we have a split in ourselves between theory and knowledge on the one hand, and practice and life on the other. And Percy was a master at shining a gentle but exacting light on this malady. Writing about one of his theory-drenched, disembodied protagonists, Will Barrett, he says, "He made the highest possible scores on psychological aptitude tests, especially in the areas of problem-solving and goal-seeking. The trouble was he couldn't think what to do between tests."

I memorized this and so many other passages from Percy in college, and continue to read him, just for his ability to name this gap in our experience. You can get all As and still flunk life, Percy said in another place; you can be an expert on happiness and be a miserable person; you can have written a book on meaning-making, and yet sat with your spouse in the final days of her illness and wondered if there was any meaning to be made. Life always exceeds our categories, and our theories all end up marooned at some point. And through some terrible mercy, we come to realize that we aren't as enlightened or godly as we think.

This realization is one that humbles us, and is also the beginning of wisdom, the great theme Paul has been lifting up for us the last few weeks in his first letter to the Corinthians. The problem is that we've largely lost our ability to detect what wisdom looks like any more. We've sold our souls to disembodied knowledge, to what we might call "smartness." Our lives have become smarter and smarter. We have smart cars and smart phones and smart lights and smart refrigerators and smart TVs and smart watches. Our education system is all about smartness: testing and rewarding smarts. And yet, sometimes I fear we are educating our kids to be something like music theorists – memorizing notes, scales, tempos, and movements, all the while never learning how to let one's body be enveloped by the sheer beauty of the sound.

We are a society of experts and specialists; yet, is there anyone who can help us actually live well? Maybe its one of the reasons we come to church. Because we want to reflect on how to live from a more whole, authentic, real, and wise place? We want to be around people like us who are seeking to live well, and not superficially. Though the books, gurus, and pundits abound, I think we can agree we live in a wisdom starved culture, and given the paucity of examples and role models, we might struggle to identify what wisdom actually looks like.

What I want to do is offer you three phrases that might help you think about what Christian wisdom is and what it

looks like. Three aspects, dimensions of Christian wisdom.

The first phrase is earthy humility. We are bodies. Our power is finite; our reach is bounded; our flourishing is fragile; our mortality is unavoidable. We have minds, and those minds can think way beyond our limitations, but those minds are part of our bodies. Our bodies are not clumsy obstacles to our dreams; instead any wisdom we find will come out of the harmony of our minds and our bodies. We aren't the only bodies, however. Now or in time. There have been many people before who have asked questions as big as ours, and found truth as deep as we have. Their wisdom is the template for ours. That's what the scriptures are for Christians: the wisdom of those who have encountered God. Our willingness to read the Scriptures is a sign of our humility that we take our place as small players in a huge story. Scripture isn't a constellation of disembodied ideals. It is an earthy series of pragmatic instances of fragile human encounters with Ultimate Reality, distilled and percolated over time into wisdom.

Look at the palms of your hands. And take the pulse of your touch. Look at your smile in the mirror. Listen to your breathing, and inhabit your silence. Measure your step. And hear the pace and tenderness of the words you speak. These are the places where your wisdom dwells. And the place others will sense it. This is where earthy humility resides.

The second phrase is shameful suffering. There is no avoiding suffering in life; it's so integral to life that in one case – Buddhism – a whole religion has been constructed to address it. A great deal of suffering is the flip side of love. If we didn't love, if we hadn't allowed our whole being to be wrapped up in the life of others, we wouldn't be so beset by suffering. But we've chosen not to be islands. And yet suffering is inextricably tied up with wisdom.

At the end of Sophocles's Oedipus Trilogy, with the characteristic pile of Greek corpses and blood disclosing that once again some good Greek kids had made some poor choices with tragic results, Creon is the one figure still

standing, and he's described as a man who through suffering had become wise. That's not what suffering is for, but it is the most common way we seek to redeem suffering. If you are in a place of intense suffering right now, you'll be facing this reality: do I let it make me bitter; do I try to suppress it and defeat it; or do I let it make my soul grow and give me wisdom.

But don't miss the sense of shame. We avoid and fear shame maybe more than we do suffering. Shame strips us of our defenses against our fragile mortality; we have no justice to call on; no public esteem to hope for; no leg to stand on. Just feel that blush that engulfs your whole body. Shame is nakedness in the face of ridicule; vulnerability in the face of blame, and guilt without excuse. If wisdom is going to speak from the depths it must pierce our pride and reach our shame.

The third phrase is effervescent joy. Think about the moment you are carried off to heaven singing a hymn. Or when a special person comes around the corner at the arrivals part of the airport and you race towards them with outstretched arms. Or when you open your eyes and realize there is no other place in the world you'd rather be. We can get all sentimental about the wisdom of children, but children can often see realities that we struggle to see. Suffering isn't the whole reality of the human lot, there is also ecstasy and worship. To worship is to say all the reality I've ever known is swallowed up in you. I've been walking my life into a headwind, and now I want to turn around and be swept off the ground in your spirit. That handing over of control; that letting go of one's ultimate destiny is central part of wisdom. It's the realization that there is immense power in the universe that can't be acquired by force but can only be received as a gift. Prayer is the moment we tap into that immense power. But its effervescent because there's always more; its always overflowing; always blowing the lid off. Wisdom isn't something you can nail down. Its something that bursts out of reduction and rolls away the stone of theory.

Earthy humility, shameful suffering, effervescent joy. This is the shape of wisdom.

In the first century, the dominant philosophy was Greek. The Greeks focused their quest for human fulfillment on one thing above all, what they called Sophia, and what we call wisdom. When St. Paul wrote to Christians in Greece, he said that this age old quest for wisdom had met its destiny in Jesus Christ. Jesus was every-thing sophia was searching for. And what was the wisdom Jesus brought?

Jesus brought the wisdom of Incarnation. Jesus fully inhabited a human body, and made the truth of God tangible in human form. Jesus blessed the ordinary and the mundane, both the created world and the people in it. He spent time in the mountains, the sea, the desert, the plains. He expressed the wisdom of the country and the discourse of the market place. You could call this wisdom of incarnation, earthy humility.

But Jesus also brought the wisdom of the cross. The cross wasn't just excruciating, slow, and agonizing torture; it was utter wholesale and merciless shame. It was the way Romans exposed rebellious peasants and recalcitrant slaves and made a fool of them, showing what became of those who thought they knew better than the emperor's idea of peace. We don't think very much of displaying crosses along roadsides, or in churches, or as pendants around our necks, but never forget that the cross is the symbol of utter shame, so much so that the Greeks couldn't comprehend how you could call someone savior if their death was so un-speakably embarrassing. Just for a moment let Jesus speak wisdom from your places of embarrassment and humiliation. Jesus spoke wisdom from the two darkest, most terrifying places of all. You could call this wisdom. Shameful suffering.

And Jesus also brought the wisdom of Resurrection and the descent of the Holy Spirit. Jesus embodied a life death couldn't contain, a power that was like wind and fire, a bubbling overflowing delight that inspired worship and felt like a torrent of cleansing water into which you longed to jump. This was the wisdom of Beyond and Above and

Ecstasy and Forever. You could call this of Resurrection and Pentecost, effervescent joy.

So this is the secret of wisdom. Jesus.

Jesus wasn't a wandering sage who sat cross legged under a eucalyptus tree and uttered epigrams; Jesus wasn't a distant genius who was so wrapped in his re-search that he only had capacity for opaque poly-syllables. He wasn't a member of a privileged elite who walked around the agora conversing with men like him-self about a wisdom only afforded by leisure and wealth. Jesus' life is the shape of wisdom. It has ordinary, homespun, pragmatic, earthy humility. It has wrought and etched consolations chiseled from shameful suffering. It has delight beyond words, power beyond imagining, bathed in effervescent joy.

This is what Paul is describing in 1 Cor. 2. And he has a phrase to name this wis-dom and where it resides. He calls it the Mind of Christ. But here's the astonishing part. He says we have the Mind of Christ. Not we've seen it, or heard of it, or read it about it somewhere, or we've thought about it for a while, or we respect it, or we like it, or we are influenced by it. We have it. We have the mind of Christ. We've been given this wisdom.

Christianity is not a theory about the nature of reality; its not a set of dogmas about a metaphysical beyond; its not a story about a distant being who was once unhappy becoming pacified by a sacrifice. Christianity is about the wisdom of a particular kind of life. Its not something we can sit back and read about. It calls us out of heads down into our bodies in a earthy humility. Its not a means to assuage the nagging feelings of guilt and humiliation and shame; its an invitation to discov-er a Power that won't let these be the last words. It is not a rational explanation for the mechanics of the universe. It is effervescent joy, a joy that can't get over the fact that there is a universe to begin with. Our faith is an invitation into wholeness. An invitation into leading lives of integrity. Not disembodied and ab-stracted in the secular realm of technology or the religious realm of the spiritual. It is about earth, and tears, and pain, and how it all is bathed

in a higher joy and de-light. Our faith isn't an invitation to be smarter, but to be more alive. And we walk into this new life not merely with our own resources: we have the mind of Christ.