

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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K.I.S.S.

(The Cause and Curse of an Immature Culture)

1 Corinthians 13.9-12; Proverbs 1.20-33

Russ Dean, September 17, 2006



In a clever and insightful radio commentary this week, writer John Ridley noted that the collective attention-deficit of our nation has risen, again.¹ When the White House Spokesman recently spoke of Ned Lamont’s victory in Connecticut, he apparently referred to the party who elected Lamont as the “defeatocrats.” Ridley says in that moment the era of the “sound bite” closed, and we awoke to the dawn of the age of the “word bite.” Ridley believes when such “dumbing down” of the country reaches the level of the highest office in the land, we have succumbed to a new, low standard.

To contrast his “word bite” with its recently separated antecedent, Ridley played two notable examples of the familiar “sound bite,” our once-favored tool of communication. From Ronald Reagan’s second election campaign, Ridley offered, “Are you better off today than you were four years ago?” And, from a notable speech from then-President Clinton, “There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be fixed by what is right with America.” These powerful political phrases give solid evidence that simplemindedness is not the monopoly of any political party.²

Now, there is truth in the sound bite, no doubt. And great power – Reagan may well have been re-elected by that one strategically astute, briefly-stated question. But what I’m suggesting to you as people of faith, is what I think John Ridley was trying to

¹ John Ridley, “Politicians fall in love with ‘word bites’,” September 14, 2006, N.P.R.’s “Morning Edition.”

² Ridley does not speak of simplemindedness, that is my word, as I blend his editorial into the sermon.

say in a secular way, and that is, that so much more... needs to be said. So much more must be said if we are ever to discover the way of Wisdom, who is calling in the streets. We as individuals, and we as a nation, need her voice more than ever.

Going back to Ridley's examples, the question Christian Americans need to ask their leaders is not "am I better off today?" Since "my" security and prosperity and future are always entangled, inevitably and irreversibly, with the wellbeing of the whole, the questions faith-full people we ought to demand answered are, "Is the nation better off? Are the poor better off? Are the helpless better off?" And, even more difficulty in this age of war, "Is our global community more alive, more at liberty, happier – or is 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' only an American birthright, or a personal one? As they know so well, however, Presidents do not get elected by asking difficult questions, which yield complex answers – answers that sometimes indict as much as they vindicate.

And, turning to the other sound bite, yes, there is much right with America, but does not such smug self-assurance often keep us from really addressing the wrong? If the wrongness can be overcome by our rightness, why do we seem so often at risk of a mutually-assured self-destruction?

Politicians, and pastors, as you know, do not usually keep their seats unless they can boil down for their electorate a simple truth in a simple formula. The trouble is that sound bites (and now their newer, smaller, more troubling offspring) do convey truth. But always, only partial truth. And partial truths usually blind us to the greater lies that "threaten to undo us." Yes, Mr. Reagan, I am better off today than I was four years ago. There is no doubt. But I believe there is also more poverty and corruption and less tolerance and forbearance – and because of these I sense a quietly rising fear and despair

all around. Yes, Mr. Clinton, we can fix everything wrong with this country. But good people continue to choose not to do so. And I believe we will never learn to make better choices if we keep framing the problems and the solutions in such simplistic rhetoric.

John Ridley concludes his tirade against the “word bite” with a stinging touché to “loosaticians” everywhere: Disavow that unwritten code which keeps all cultures in thrall to the tyranny of simplemindedness.³ The code is known by its necessary shorthand: K.I.S.S. Such a mentality, “Keep it simple, stupid!,” always runs amok in the streets. It is the duty and responsibility of moral people, and, I believe, a specific imperative to us who live “by the book,” to call into question this understandable but destructive force.

How, then, will we know simplemindedness when it threatens to make fools of us all? I will try to make it easy for you by making several brief suggestions!

First, at risk of overstating the obvious, let me suggest that first and foremost, simpleminded language and solutions are, well, simple! But, complex issues cannot be summarized, much less, solved, in a “word bite.” And this is what is so dangerous about the state of our national discourse. Because no one has the time to devote to dialogue anymore, and, worse than this, I fear, most people simply do not want to do the work that it takes to think through complex issues, we have chosen (maybe even deliberately so) to let a few well-crafted and usually emotionally-laden phrases capture our opinion, on whatever the issue.

In the course of at least two decades of mostly unproductive argument, for example, we’ve boiled down one of the most difficult personal, medical, and ethical

³ Again, this summary of Ridley’s editorial is in my words, blended with the purpose of the sermon. He does not specifically offer a challenge (i.e., “Disavow that unwritten code...”), nor does mention the K.I.S.S. acronym. I believe that my summary, however, is basically on target with Ridley’s purpose.

issues that can be known into two monolithic and impenetrable camps: Pro-Choice and Pro-Life. There they are, the “word bites” of a culture too lazy for dialogue. We are asked to judge that anyone who believes this issue is too difficult and personal and individual and dangerous to be left to a blanket decision made by any government, that anyone who would ask questions out of such concern, is really “pro-death.” And, on the other narrow hand, that one of the most difficult choices a human being can ever make should be a simple matter of “a woman’s right to choose,” as if a fetus were just a brand of cereal or a color of car. Isn’t there more to be said – on both sides!?

And, I am so tired of having my patriotism called into question, of being branded a coward and a traitor for suggesting that there is another option in Iraq than simply “staying the course.” I am told that anyone who would stake my position wants us to tuck tail and “cut and run.” Please, Mr. President, human lives are at stake. The future, in so many ways, is at stake. We can think more creatively. We must think more broadly. The issue is just not so simple.⁴ Poet and farmer Wendell Berry says, “An inescapable requirement of true patriotism, love for one’s land, is a vigilant distrust of any determinative power, elected or unelected, that may preside over it.” When we have become so narrow that we cannot listen to another opinion without branding those who differ with us traitors, we are in great danger of losing that which we all love and hold dear.

⁴ I maintain my position even with those who believe we should have gone to Iraq, and that we must remain. My purpose here is not to call the President to task for what I believe is a string of disastrously bad choices in foreign policy, but to say that perhaps worse than these mistakes, is the deliberate choice to polarize the nation, further, by the use of a simplistic rhetoric, which demeans the value of a national dialogue, which would benefit the nation and even our military strategy. I believe there are choices which should be discussed – even if in the end the nation stays in Iraq – but we are led to believe, by the President’s divisive and cut-and-dried language, that there is only one real choice (“stay the course”), and that all others are the foolish choice of un-American cowards.

Abortion and war and biomedical research and education and human sexuality and poverty and religious differences are all issues that deserve more than “word bites” of understanding. I am not suggesting that only elite academicians, those with PhD’s and advanced training, should be allowed to participate. I believe in the capacity of human beings, regardless of their educational pedigree, to get beyond simple answers to complex questions. But we are not much in the mood for such discourse at this time, and our bipolar divisions make the language that does come from the academy, and from those who insist on trying to lay out the question and examine the options, seem snobbish and insular. It is a sad state of affairs. Life is not simple. We cannot afford, therefore, to settle for simple language and simple so-called solutions.

Simplemindedness will always seek a too-simple language. Wisdom calls us to acknowledge the complexity of the issues before us, and to seek a responsible and respectful conversation, which would lead a global community forward.

Secondly, simplemindedness will always come to us, however carefully crafted, in self-centered language. Why was President Reagan’s re-election sound-bite so powerful? Because it was so personal. It caused people to narrow an election choice to a single, personal motive. We do think about our own welfare – as well we should – but people of faith (and this is my argument – for people of faith⁵) cannot stop there. We must begin to know and understand the other. I can think of no more important time to

⁵ One issue that I have tried to call our congregation’s attention to is the fact that decisions made by Christians are to be made from a different set of values, altogether, than from their secular (or Jewish or Muslim, etc...) counterparts. For example, going to war may be defensible for purely economic reasons, from a secular perspective, but if we are to be true to the message of Jesus (at least as I understand it), war, if it is allowed, must meet a much higher criterion. I do not expect the same decisions to be made by non-followers of Jesus as from us who claim his name. The trouble with such a highly religious society, and such critique has been offered of the church since the conversion of Constantine in the 4th century, is that religious motives and secular/national motives become intertwined, sometimes to the point that people are unaware if they are acting because they are “Christian,” or because they are “American” (or that there is even any difference!)

preach such a message than now. We are so divided, by issues, by religious understanding, by nationality, by political persuasion, and we will not close those divisions by force, by obliterating those who disagree. Mary Field Belenky says that “Connected knowers do not measure other people’s worth by some impersonal standard. Their purpose is not to judge but to understand.”⁶ We have become a nation of disconnected knowers. Or, perhaps disconnected un-knowers, and our divisions will be our demise. The Golden Rule, “*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*”(Matthew Luke 6.31 and Matthew 7.12) is not just theological wisdom, it is practice advice, “enlightened self-interest” of the best kind, which begins with a willingness to know someone else as a person, however different, who has, yet, the same needs as I do.

Simplemindedness will always be motivated by selfishness. Wisdom calls us to be aware of the other, and to see in the other one’s own self.

Third, simplemindedness is always arrogant. There is no end to the examples that could be cited here. The arrogance of Christian preaching has reached an idolatrous height. Far too many preachers routinely proclaim to know “God’s will” and to give God’s stamp of approval to whatever issue they happen to be stumping on at the moment. William Cowper reminds us that “Knowledge is proud that he has learned so much; Wisdom is humble that he knows no more.”⁷ We need a good dose of humility in our national and religious language.⁸

⁶ From, *The Ways of Knowing*, quoted in “The Living Pulpit,” Jul-Sep, 2000, p.34.

⁷ William Cowper, *The Task*, 1785, The Living Pulpit “Wisdom” p.33

⁸ Learn what you can, but cultivate Christian skepticism. It will keep you free --- not free to do anything you please, but free to be formed by something larger than your own intellect or the intellects of those around you.

Flannery O’Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letter of Flannery O’Connor*, The Living Pulpit “Wisdom” p.33

Simplemindedness language is arrogant language. Wisdom comes cloaked in the language and recognition of a basic sense of humility.

And, finally, but perhaps not so obvious is this: simplemindedness is both the cause and result of laziness. I fear that we have been given so much, had so much of life and its stuff just handed to us, that we have forgotten that everything worth having is still worth working for. And wisdom, perhaps above all else, is immensely worth having. Do you know what great leader said, “What good fortune for governments that people do not think”? It was one who knew human capacity, but also its inclination toward laziness, and who as well as any other leader in history exploited this laziness for demonic ends. “What good fortune... that people do not think” – Adolph Hitler.

A thousand years ago, the great theologian Peter Abelard said, “The first key to wisdom is assiduous and frequent questioning. For by doubting we come to enquiry and by enquiry we arrive at the truth.”⁹ Abelard was talking of theological and philosophical questioning, but the same is true for every aspect of our living. The problem is that doubting and questioning takes energy, and it seems more and more clear to me that many in the Church have no energy left for “assiduous and frequent questioning” when they finally arrive on a Sunday morning. And it is abundantly clear that we as a nation do not, either. I fear where such laziness will lead us. The warning (prophecy?) included in Lady Wisdom’s words in today’s text give us an indication.

In his commentary on the book of Proverbs, Richard Clifford says this:

...self-induced [calamity] will befall not just individual persons, but entire nations... Wisdom is a matter of life and death not just for individuals but for families, corporations, universities, nations, and cultures. They, too, reap what they sow.¹⁰

⁹ Peter Abelard, *The Living Pulpit* “Wisdom” p.33

¹⁰ Richard Clifford, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume V, p.41.

Even today as we celebrate the life and experience and wisdom of our Senior Adults,¹¹ let us pray that we may reap their wisdom, and even more, by sowing seeds of a generous self-giving, and not selfishness, seeds of humility and not arrogance, seeds of an industrious work-ethic and not laziness. And let us know that the conversation, though sometimes frustrating and painful and contentious, and always time-consuming, we be life-giving, for it will lead us to a maturity which we have seen fulfilled in Jesus Christ, whom Paul says, *became for us wisdom from God* (1 Corinthians 1.30).

Grant us that wisdom today.

May it be so.

¹¹ We celebrated our annual “Senior Adult Recognition Sunday” today.