

Tim's Sermon

7 March 2021

One summer's afternoon in 1665, Isaac Newton took tea amid the apple trees in his family's garden. At just the right moment, an apple stem's dwindling hold on the tree branch could no longer withstand the pull of the earth. The apple dropped. Newton got bopped on the head, and a series of thoughts was set into motion that ended not just with gravity proven out mathematically, but with a whole new world view, now described as "Newtonian."

Newton saw all creation as a vast machine. Newton knew that scientific methods could reveal more about this machine, and the preferred method for Newton was that we should study the parts of this machine of creation.

In the past several centuries, scientists and mathematicians have come to know more about the universe by using Newton's method. But beneath the fabric of the Newtonian universe, more recently, quantum physics has revealed a very different world at the subatomic level.

Whereas scientists had previously noted the emptiness of space, the lack of matter, quantum physics has revealed connections. A famous experiment found that when two subatomic particles interacted, after they are separated, a cause on one of the particles still had an effect on the other. They remained connected in some way.

These recent discoveries at the subatomic level have revealed that, although the universe may be a vast machine, we can never understand the world through understanding the parts alone. The connections also matter – and perhaps matter even more than the parts alone.

While describing these discoveries briefly in a sermon makes the changes seem tame, for the scientists who have done the work, it is disturbing. They expected the subatomic world to be just as uniform and orderly as the one in which the apple dropped on Sir Isaac's head. In-stead they found uncertainty and unseen connections, which Einstein labeled "spooky." These discoveries continue to challenge the worldview of Newton.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul is also countering one worldview with another – he takes on the worldview of Greek philosophers with the wisdom of the cross of Jesus Christ as seen through the lens of the resurrection. Paul's challenge to the wisdom of ancient Greece is not a new and more compelling wisdom, but foolishness. That's the way Paul puts it: The cross is foolishness. He writes, though, that, "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

The city of Corinth is known to this day for a particular style of column with a fancy design at the top. These Corinthian columns held up great temples to the Greek and Roman gods. They were also the product of Greek and Roman thought. This was the sort of wisdom that Paul was seeking to overturn with his proclamation of the gospel.

Paul is writing to Christians. They have already become believers, but the church is facing problems. There are some who feel that they are smarter than others. So smart that they can bend the rules and still be OK. There are others with spiritual pride. And into a church facing these problems, Paul begins with a passage on the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion. We get just the beginning of the case Paul will make in today's reading and yet what Paul is doing, I believe, is as revolutionary as Newton's change of worldviews that we started with.

The paradoxes are wise foolishness and weak strength. At first, a paradox can sound like an oxymoron. An oxymoron has two ideas together that do not go together, such as "entertaining sermon." A paradox is a statement with two apparently contradictory ideas that are somehow truer together. This is wise foolishness and weak strength.

Paul tells those who think they are wise that God's wisdom is very different from their knowledge. He tells those who feel as if they have power or authority that God's strength is very different from their ideas of power and might. The paradigm, the example, the key image to explain the paradoxes is the cross of Jesus, understood in the light of the resurrection. Paul begins:

"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. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'"

Paul quotes here from the prophet Isaiah. As a good Jew, Paul understood the context for Isaiah's prophecy. The leaders of Israel were facing a much superior Babylonian army. Isaiah called on the people to let God sort out Israel's salvation. But those words of trusting God alone when an opposing army was on the march seemed like folly. Israel ignored the prophet and put their trust in an alliance with Egypt, which, to them, seemed like the smartest course of action. God responded through Isaiah that the wisdom of the wise would be destroyed. When push came to shove, Egypt did not, in fact, have Israel's back. Babylon won, and Israel was taken captive.

For Paul this situation is happening all over. The Corinthian Christians are not putting their faith in God alone, but are leaning on that old Greek standby, human wisdom. Paul sees this as something overturned in the crucifixion.

Because as Paul notes, the cross is folly. The idea of God suffering and dying was ludicrous. A suffering and dying God is an oxymoron at best and an affront to reason and wisdom to be sure. The

argument follows that if there is a God who created all that is, such a powerful God surely could not and would not be harmed by mere humans.

But with wise foolishness, God did not just sit back and watch the drama of the creation unfold. In Jesus, God entered both into humanity and into creation and in doing so, God became vulnerable in Jesus, the Son.

This action on God's part is not just some new teaching or clever idea. The Incarnation is the world-changing intervention into human history. By reason alone, it would have been utter foolishness for the One who could be above and beyond creation to enter in. By reason alone, Jesus' death revealed his weakness. But when we see by the light of faith, Jesus had a choice; he did not have to be faithful unto death. Jesus could have fought the violence of Rome with violence all his own. Instead, Jesus continued to love humanity, even when the cost of that love was suffering and death. And the Holy Trinity subverted all of human wisdom and power in overturning death with Jesus' resurrection.

This is where the two threads of the sermon get entwined as we have explored the world view of Newton and a quantum universe, then we looked at the world views of Greek thought alone or the power of God as revealed in the cross of Christ.

Now, notice that in Newton's way of seeing the world, we are a vast machine of separate, though important, parts. This way of viewing the world ended with people feeling very separate, very isolated alienated from one another.

But in a quantum universe, essential connections are revealed. Rather than there being lots of empty space, the universe is full and connected, and what's more the connections matter. This is the paradox on which the building blocks of the universe stand, that despite the fact that we do not see the connections, all is actually connected.

This we see even more clearly in the cross and resurrection of Christ. We do not see a disconnected God, off distant in the heavens. We find Jesus having emptied himself, being born as a human and suffering and dying on a cross. God is more essentially connected to us than we had ever imagined.

And in the cross of Christ, this wise foolishness, we discover the strength of God's love, that God would be willing to take on human vulnerability and would continue to love rather than fight back. It is a love that God calls each one of us to enter in. This love of God is the connection that binds together all creation. Paul knew that this would sound like foolishness to some, but those who have experienced that connection would understand as wisdom.

This is why Jesus distilled all of Jewish Law to “Love God and love your neighbour as yourself.” He knew that love was the very real connection already binding us together. This morning Paul is teaching us an extraordinary and countercultural worldview with strong weakness and wise foolishness of the cross at its centre and that this undying, immeasurable, transforming and transfiguring love of God is the very building block on which the whole universe stands. Amen.