



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 6 (C)

Wisdom and Understanding

[RCL] Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26

There's a piece of folk wisdom passed down each generation from violin teachers to violin students that when a string instrument is played well, the instrument itself improves. This bit of lore extends not just to violins, but to all string instruments, including the cello, upright bass, and viola. Luthiers, those who make stringed instruments, when pressed, will admit that there is no conclusive double-blind experiment evidence to support this theory. Part of the problem in gathering this evidence is the difficulty in creating an experiment that is truly double-blind. Thus, while there is no real evidence in the affirmative, there is also no real evidence that this folk wisdom is not true. And so with this paucity of proof in either direction, the myth persists. What the musicians and luthiers have identified is the truth that there is more to reality than can be measured or quantified. Just because these phenomena are unmeasurable does not mean they are unobservable or any less real in shaping our physical, material reality. So it is with our faith, as we see in the readings for today.

We have forayed almost two full months into the new year, journeying on in the wake of the feast of Epiphany—that day Christians celebrate the revelation of the Divine made manifest among humanity in Jesus Christ. And in today's readings, we are reminded that there are things beyond what we can understand in this world.

The prophet Jeremiah speaks forcibly, “Thus says the Lord: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord.” To rely on human strength, the efforts of us mere mortals, is not only foolish but accursed, according to the weeping prophet. The author continues by extolling those who trust in God, yet the passage reaches its full crescendo with condemnation of the human heart. “The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?” Human intentions, human efforts, human doings can only lead us so far. Indeed, even the human heart—human compassion, human empathy—is bound by limits at best and susceptible to artifice at worst. Faith demands we reach out beyond what we can feel, perceive, or even know. Faith demands we reach out to God.

The epistle reading for the day leads us further down this road of trust in something beyond what we can comprehend. Paul, in his first letter to the church in Corinth, writes of the absolute necessity of the

Resurrection. “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” These words are meant as words of comfort to the first-century Christian community, but to many readers today, a belief in the physical and bodily resurrection can present itself as a stumbling block. What does this mean? Does this mean that we must believe in the exact cosmology and metaphysical system of the first-century Christians? Does this mean we cannot be Christians if we do not hold onto this cosmology? How can that possibly be relevant to our lives in the 21st century?

When we ask questions about the relevance of Scripture to our own lives, we are often asking: what is the relevance of a transcendent divinity to our own human lives? How are these ancient words written millennia ago applicable to my situation today? Our reverence for humanism and scientific progress can cloud our ability to lean into these words about a God beyond our understanding. That human actions can only lead us so far seems like a beautiful saying. But what does this mean in actuality? How does a Christian today live this out?

Similarly, the belief in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is something that we affirm regularly in the creed, but what does this belief mean for our daily lives? While most contemporary Christian theologians have moved through and beyond the miracle-denying cosmologies of the likes of Schleiermacher, Strauss, and Schweitzer, our theologies around the resurrection have remained relatively muted.

Andrew Root, contemporary theologian and author, writes that Christianity in a secular age moves from seeing faith as relevant to something that is resonant. For Root, relevance is about transferring content. Resonance, on the other hand, is about a feeling or experience. While certainly there is much to be learned *about* God from Scripture, the beauty of the Christian faith is that it’s not just about intellectual stimulation—indeed, although some would feel safer if that were the case!

The mystery of our faith is not just that the words of the Scriptures apply today to our situation here, across vast centuries of time and thousands of miles of space. Among the mysteries of faith is that, through these words, we can still encounter the divine. Consider our analogy from the world of music.

Why do musicians insist that playing an instrument well improves the instrument? It could be that the instruments that already sound good get played more, and any noted improvement is just the natural improvement any well-crafted instrument would develop with age. Or similarly, it could be a survival-of-the-fittest situation, in which only the good-sounding instruments survive to be played much at all. Or, perhaps, it could indeed be that there is something about the resonance, the echoes, and the harmonics that improve a physical instrument’s tone and sound quality. In other words, it could be that the encounter between musician and instrument creates a resonance that enriches the material of the instrument itself.

The mystery of our Christian faith is at times much like the mystery of the well-played violin. When we read Scripture, we certainly do look for things that are relevant to our lives. But we also bask in the encounter with the divine, having faith that God meets us in the reading of the holy words. It is this

encounter with the divine that gave life to the faith of the mystics like Hildegard, Julian, and Teresa. The readings then become less about mining for nuggets of applicable wisdom, and more about looking and listening for resonance with the beauty we find in our lives, in the world, and in each other.

Let us turn now to that great sermon from the gospel text for the day. The Beatitudes, as these statements are known, are the subject of a long theological debate. On the one hand are those who argue that the sayings are descriptive—they are meant to affirm that those who are of lowly station in life now will be exalted in the Kingdom of God. On the other hand are those who claim that they are prescriptive. This view maintains that Jesus is saying that all his followers should be poor, sacrificing to the point of hunger, and weeping over the mournful events occurring in one's community and around the world.

Certainly, these are important theological debates to consider. But when we read for resonance, rather than relevance, new questions, thoughts, and ideas arise from the passage. Instead of, "How does this passage apply to me?" or "Are these or aren't these relevant to me?" the question becomes, "How does this passage resonate with my encounters with God?"

In this hermeneutic, Paul's words about the centrality of resurrection guide us to consider where we see Jesus' resurrection echo and harmonize with our experiences, our histories, and our lives. We attune ourselves to the beautiful mysteries of faith. The words of the beatitudes similarly become a living word when we let them wash over us: when we attune ourselves to the poor, the hungry, and the weeping around us.

Let us consider not just the relevance of these words. But let us truly let them resonate in our lives. May we all consider the mystery of the divine around us, within us, and outside us as we seek to attune ourselves to the unfolding of the Kingdom of God. Amen.

Michael Toy, an alumnus of Princeton Theological Seminary, has worked in Christian formation since 2013. He now spends his time writing, blogging, and trying to live out the radical call to love our neighbors.