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On Being a Campus Chaplain at the Beginning of a New Millennium¹

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Texts: Proverbs 8:1-7, 10-11, 22-36; Philippians 4:8; Mark 10:35-45

Jonathan, you are a person who knows a lot. It's not only that you have a degree from York University and another from this Seminary. Nor is it simply that in the last two years you've been learning Spanish and getting to know Central American culture – as well as the strange language and culture of that land immediately to the south of us when you and Alice were living in Cleveland this past year.

You also have a lot of *know-how*. You know how to play the saxophone, the flute, the piano, the guitar.

You know how to ski – and to date have evidently avoided trees on the way down.

You know how to manage a restaurant and youth camps, and how to carry on fruitful youth ministry as you did at St. John's and in our Synod.

We are grateful that you will bring those various kinds of knowledge and *know-how* to your calling here as campus chaplain at the two universities in Waterloo.

And I know that you have reflected on the importance of knowledge in our world. As a campus chaplain, you know that Universities are dedicated to the advancement of knowledge.

You know that professors carry on research and communicate the results to their peers and to the public in books and articles.

You know that the research that professors do bears fruit in what they

teach in the classroom.

You know that students come to universities to know more – especially that high tech knowledge that is so crucial in what is called our knowledge-based economy.

And you know that our culture, our wired world, is very big on knowledge. What is there that one cannot find on the internet? Someone, somewhere, can supply whatever you think you might need or want to know, whether it is lodging for the night (complete with coloured photo of a typical room with queen-sized bed and turned down sheets) or a CD of some long-forgotten group (tie dies and bell bottoms) or simply the weather two days from now whether in Haiti or Hamilton. It's all there through some search engine or at some .com or some .org.

Yet, as one looks back over this century now almost past, it's sometimes rather startling to discover what at one time passed for knowledge – or expert opinion. In 1899 the head of the U.S. Patent Office stated that "Everything that can be invented has been invented." Thomas Edison in 1922 was sure that "The radio craze...will die out in two years." Thomas Watson, the head of IBM, said in 1943, "I think there is a world market for about five computers." And in 1984 two writers in the very respected journal *Science* were certain that "The cloning of mammals...is biologically impossible."²

Those experts knew a lot – but they didn't know it all. No one does. And I would guess that however much you prize knowledge, Jonathan, you don't *want* to know it all, that is, you don't want to be a know-it-all. And if I were to ask you to make a short list of the gifts you would covet for your ministry here among us, I wouldn't be surprised if high on your list would be wisdom, a discerning kind of knowing. If so, you would be following in the footsteps of Solomon who, on becoming king of Israel, was asked by the Lord what gift he would desire. What did Solomon ask for? Not riches, not long life, not victory over his enemies. What he asked for was wisdom (1 Kings 3:5-14).

In the Hebrew Bible, Solomon is *the* wise man, even though acquiring a thousand wives – as he was said to have done – may not seem to us particularly wise. Tradition credited Solomon with the authorship of the book of Proverbs, thirty-one chapters of wise sayings. One of those chapters is devoted wholly to wisdom. As we heard in the reading from that chapter, the author can't say enough about wisdom.

Wisdom is a constituent element of life, of the cosmos.

God created wisdom before the earth and the mountains, before the ocean deeps and the springs of life-giving water, before the circle of the sky and the foundations of the earth.

And now wisdom is God's delight, and wisdom in turn delights in God's world and in the humans that inhabit it.

Wisdom *cares* about those same humans. She stands on the roadside, at the crossroads, at the city gates, inviting people to listen to her, to receive her gifts, which are better than silver and gold and jewels. "All that you desire cannot compare with her," says the author (8:11).

But where does one find wisdom, and how would you recognize it if you saw it, and how does it relate to what you, Jonathan, and the rest of us do in the work of campus ministry?

Job asks that very important and perennial question: Where is wisdom to be found? (Job 28:12). You won't find it, he says, buried deep in a mine, or in the depths of the sea, or hidden in the realm of the dead (Job 28).

Today, of course, we have it a lot easier. We can tell Job where to look for wisdom: look on the internet. Type in "wisdom" on a search engine or two and you'll find everything from a wise saying by Will Rogers (kindly put there by Mike Anderson's seafood restaurants in New Orleans and other choice locations), to an icon of Christ as holy wisdom (in the form of a woman), to stock market picks, to "genius t-shirts", and something called The Lord's Baseball Game. And after perusing that list, if you then click on "GO", Jonathan, you will have a chance of winning a washer and dryer, which I'm sure would come in very handy as you settle into a new location here in Kitchener-Waterloo.

But Job discerns a different path to wisdom: since it is God who created wisdom, it is God who knows the way to wisdom (28:23-27). For Christians, the way to wisdom has long been connected with Jesus. Some scholars today see Jesus as primarily – even solely – a wisdom teacher. The Apostle Paul sees more. He calls Jesus "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24). But what a strange kind of power and what peculiar wisdom Paul points to: a man dying on a cross!

How is a man, hanging helpless on a cross, possessed of power?

And does it make sense for God's chosen one to die the most shame-

ful death one could inflict at the time?

This is power? This is wisdom? Some power, some wisdom!

You can bet that a Greek or Roman deity in Jesus' day wouldn't be caught dead on a cross. Yet that message of the cross – of a powerful powerlessness and a foolish wisdom – is what Christians have affirmed for two millennia.

Was that message really so powerless, or so foolish? Pontius Pilate—the man of power who crucified Jesus – would scarcely be remembered today if Christians did not mention him when confessing their faith in the one whom Pilate crucified. A walk through the fifth floor of the library here on campus will show that that foolish story of that shameful death on a cross evoked thousands and thousands of books, some of them very wise.

And, yes, some of them just plain foolish.

One reason for their foolishness, I would suggest, is that the authors thought they knew it all – that they had a monopoly on truth, or that Christianity or their particular version of Christianity had a monopoly on truth.

It seems to me the writers of such books hadn't read and reflected on our second reading for tonight, from Paul's letter to the Philippians. Notice the *whatevers* in that passage: *whatever* is true, *whatever* is honorable, *whatever* is just, *whatever* is pure, *whatever* is pleasing, *whatever* is commendable, if there is *any* excellence, and if there is *anything* worthy of praise, think about these things (Philippians 4:8).

What does that passage say? It says that truth is to be found *wherever* it is to be found.

Not just in the church – and not just in the university.

Not just in the Bible – and not just in the latest scholarly research.

But – “*wherever*”.

The God of wisdom is not confined to any one domain of human endeavour. The Spirit of God blows where it wills.

You, Jonathan, and all of us these days, I believe, learn from books written by persons of Christian traditions other than our own, or from quite outside of the Christian tradition. You, and all of us, work with and

learn from persons from other Christian traditions, or from persons outside of any Christian tradition. In the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, Protestant Christians and Roman Catholic Christians, thrown together in those extreme circumstances, discovered that despite their centuries of often bitter hostility they had much to learn from one another – and they became the wiser for it. In the nineteenth century, says Jaroslav Pelikan, it was a person stridently anti-Christian – Friedrich Nietzsche, like you, the son of a pastor – who saw more clearly than most of the Christians of his day that God’s kingdom was not simply nineteenth-century Western culture and civilization.³

Notice, now, that it is not just an indiscriminate, internet kind of “whatever” that the Apostle Paul recommends. There is discernment – a wise separating of wheat from chaff – implied in his list of “whatevers”. “Whatever is true” is his first “whatever”. The motto of Wilfrid Laurier University is *veritas omnia vincit*: “truth conquers all”. I take that as a motto – something to strive for – rather than a bald assertion of fact, because truth in our world is far too often conquered rather than conquering. Whistleblowers can tell us that. There is the familiar adage, frequently cited in these 1990s, that the first casualty in war is the truth. The big lie, which Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s minister of propaganda, used so effectively, is still with us in the conventional wisdom propagated in the media about what is important and good – or not – for our society and our world.

So, think about *truth*, says Paul. I believe that part of your chaplaincy, Jonathan, will be doing just that, and seeking to lead others to do that – to a wise discerning that sifts and weighs all those bytes and sound bites and other data that wash over us every day in what someone has called our “age of rapid misinformation”.⁴

Another whatever in Paul’s list gives us a clue on how to assess what is put forth as truth: think about “whatever is *just*”, says Paul. You’ve done a lot of that kind of thinking, Jonathan. Returning to the north after spending some time in the south – Central America – you have pointed out more than once that 20 percent of the people on this earth (that is, we northerners) consume or control 86 percent of the earth’s resources, at the expense of the southerners.

Is that just?

Is it just that around the world 60 million young people aged 15 to 24

are looking for work and can't find it?⁵

Is it just that in a time of supposed prosperity we have homeless people crowding into shelters, and people knocking on our church doors for assistance?

Now, what can we learn from the New Testament gospels about truth and justice and wisdom? If Paul calls Christ "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1.24), it is in the Gospel of John that Jesus calls himself "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14.6). What kind of way is that, what kind of truth, what kind of life? Like his crucifixion, his way, his truth, his life are, one might say, foolish – and yet wisely foolish. There were many sick people in his society, and no OHIP. The sick were on their own. So it is not surprising that the gospels have one story after another of the sick coming to Jesus for healing. We see Jesus reaching out a healing hand to them, restoring them to society, empowering them. Does campus ministry offer healing like that?

Jesus opens the eyes of the blind. Can you see – can we see – campus ministry seeking to do something like that as well?

Jesus opens the ears of those who can't hear. Can you see – can we see – campus ministry seeking to do something like that?

Jesus reaches out to those whom society has pushed aside and disregards, bringing God's presence to their exclusion and marginality. Can you see – can we see – campus ministry seeking to do that as well?

Jesus proclaims that in those acts of healing, of reaching out, the kingdom of God has drawn near. But, as we heard in our gospel reading for tonight, it is an upside-down kingdom, in which rulers do not rule, in which serving is prized above lording it over others. To James and John, who jockey for positions of power in Jesus' kingdom, Jesus says, "Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (Mark 10:44). And Jesus himself is the model: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45).

I know that you and Alice seek not only wisdom but to live that wisdom, to follow Jesus, that foolish wise man who demonstrated in what he said and did what is true and just and wise. Like wisdom in our first reading for tonight, Jesus stood at the roadside, the city gate, the crossroads, being present for those who passed by, for those who came to him, offering wisdom. I can see you, Jonathan, being present like that in

campus concourses and hangouts, on Bricker Street as well as on Ring Road, in the chapel here on Sunday mornings and the chaplains' offices during the week.

I think you'll have the wisdom to discern when to question conventional wisdom – when to speak and act prophetically. You'll have the wisdom to discern when to speak and act pastorally to persons in pain and confusion. You'll have the wisdom to discern when just to be a friend and lend a listening ear. We will pray such wisdom for you. For myself, I have just one word of wisdom for you: when you sit in Seagram Stadium watching Laurier and Waterloo down on the field, have the wisdom to alternate your cheers between the two teams.

God be with you and with those who minister alongside you! Amen.

Notes

- ¹ Sermon preached in the Waterloo Lutheran Seminary Chapel at the Installation of the Rev. Jonathan Schmidt as Lutheran Campus Chaplain, Waterloo, Ontario, September 26, 1999.
- ² Examples from *Time*, March 29, 1999, 156; from Christopher Cerf and Victor Navasky, *The Experts Speak* (Villard).
- ³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Fools for Christ: Essays on the True, the Good, and the Beautiful* (Muhlenberg Press, 1955), chap. 5, esp. pp. 142-144
- ⁴ Stephen Jay Gould, "Message from a Mouse," *Time*, Sept 13, 1999: 48
- ⁵ *Time*, Sept 13, 1999, 12.