

FOOL'S PARADISE

All of us wonder, from time to time, about our understanding of reality. Pilate said to Jesus, “What is truth?” Pilate was claiming that there is no such thing as truth. What is reality? “Church” is not the same thing to me that it is to many of the people I talk to. If we get to greater detail, none of us have exactly the same image of what we mean by such a word. And the word “Christian” conjures up many diverse and contradictory feelings and meanings. Some hate it, some love it. Some who are greatly troubled by parts of it nevertheless serve it well. Others who claim to love it greatly will barely lift their little finger to keep it strong, or to draw others to its mercy and power.

Many people take the commitment of faith – or, to be more specific, their commitment to the church of Jesus Christ – with a grain of salt. It is because they do not trust their own perspective. That is, they wonder if they have been duped, at least in part. They wonder if it is just something handed to them by their parents. They wonder if they are making some of it up, just to comfort themselves, or to feel part of a community they care about. We have brains enough to know that brains are powerful things, and that they construct many explanations for what is going on around us. While our own fantasies, prejudices, superstitions, and convictions may seem relatively sane and consistent to us, we have only to notice the way other people think and believe to realize fairly quickly that reality is a very nebulous and imprecise affair.

Walk into any bookstore. Go to the section on science fiction and fantasy. There you will find row after row of books, each one telling at great length an elaborate story of worlds, races, wars, and individuals who do not even exist. Hundreds of thousands of people read these stories, often getting more involved with these imaginary worlds and people than they do with the world they live in and the people all around them. If somebody in the book dies, they cry and feel devastated. But people in the real world are dying all around them, and they neither notice nor care.

It takes hundreds of authors and years of disciplined, conscientious effort to “imagine” and create these fantasy realities. It takes a whole publishing industry to keep producing and supplying these books to bookstores all over the world. And we haven't even looked at the general

fiction section yet. We haven't talked about movies or television or plays or opera or ballet. Or what about the billions upon billions of dollars our society spends every year to get balls over nets, into hoops, into holes, or back and forth on an oversized lawn? Is that reality? Is there something sane about paying a guy a million dollars to risk injury for life to move a ball seven yards up a field – without any exterior meaning or purpose whatsoever?

We have serious problems. People are starving, we are losing our forests, and in many places you can hardly drink the water or breathe the air. But we are watching the ball go back and forth, back and forth. Meanwhile, in order to do so, we are squandering enough time, energy, and money to revolutionize our world. What is reality? What is truth? What is sanity? If you are a guest here this morning, I might mention that I love to read fantasy. I try to play tennis at least three times a week. I love a good movie. And I can come up with endless rationalizations for why these and many other things are beneficial. Just because I can see that our world is nuts and has its priorities badly messed up is not to imply that I am above it all or in any way superior to it. We live here. That is part of what it means to be sinners: caught in a world alienated from God.

Back to the bookstore for a minute. Do you think the imagination and fantasy stop when you get past the fiction sections? If you think fantasy is wild, you should browse through the self-help shelves, or the section on psychology or history or physics or politics. The other day, I went to pick up a really good book on nutrition for a friend of mine. I found it, but started looking at some of the other books around it. Quickly I realized that I was back in Looney Tunes comic books. Yet doubtless all those authors were sincere. And what makes *me* think I can tell the difference anyway? Of course, only the books on religion are absolutely true and reliable – and none of them agree with any of the others. What is reality? What is truth? Whatever it is, we make it up as we go, and finding others who agree with us is a highly tenuous and temporary affair.

Have you ever heard of Immanuel Velikovsky? He was the brilliant son of a brilliant father, and he spent most of his life gathering evidence from ancient manuscripts (on the one hand) and archaeological discoveries (on the other hand), to construct an elaborate explanation of how our present physical solar system was formed by the collisions and near misses of new planets entering our sun's system. He published book

after book of plausible, interlocking evidence to support his theories. Many thousands of people, including me, believed that he must be onto something. We even wondered for a while if there was a plot by the scientific establishment to hush him up because his theories would uncover major errors in all presently accepted theories. His argument that we have inadvertently created an ancient Egyptian Dynasty that never existed, in order to explain away some problems with our chronology of ancient history, was particularly fascinating to me.

I am pretty certain that Velikovsky died in the sincere conviction that his work was monumental, groundbreaking, and essentially true, and that subsequent generations would realize that he had been right against a vast established scientific community which would not listen. But most any physicist or astronomer can assure you today, with full explanation and scientific proof, that Velikovsky was the victim of enormous amounts of information and imagination and zeal which nevertheless overlooked some fundamental laws and principles of scientific reality.

Or what do we do with stories of how Muhammad, though totally illiterate, wrote the Koran solely by means of divine guidance? Or how Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon in essentially the same manner? Today such rare phenomenons have become almost commonplace. And for those of us who do not have our own Spirit Guides to tell us about real truth and real reality, at least we all have friends who do have them. What then is to prevent us from concluding that Christianity is merely one of the major fantasy constructs of the human race? (Or that Buddhism is, or Judaism, or democracy, etc.) And even if this is not your final conclusion, such doubt, unfaced, keeps faith at half-mast. How else can we explain the half-hearted, half-committed devotion of the majority of those who claim to believe in Jesus Christ? Is Jesus a figure to inspire such insipid allegiance and life?

Yet such doubt is the essence of vast segments of modern life. Since there is no certain reality except what our minds make up, we can have it all: we can be conscientious, hard-working, productive employees on Monday; screw Martha or cheat Henry on Tuesday; fight for human rights and a better world order on Wednesday; be a good family man on Thursday; tie up the loose ends on Friday; and go crazy on the weekends – all without breaking any major convictions or beliefs. Is that not the way it is for a great many Americans? We take it all very seriously, but also with a grain of salt. All of it impacts us, but little of it cuts very deeply

into the way we spend our time, energy, or money. Nor does it affect our choices or our behavior very drastically, or with any great consistency.

If nothing else, living in such a world ought to give us real sympathy and appreciation for fundamentalist, literalist approaches to religion. Somewhere there *has* to be a truth that cannot be questioned, a book that holds no errors, a creed that separates the good guys from the bad guys, an organization that keeps us safe from all the chaos and turmoil and evil in the world “out there.” To hundreds of thousands of people, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved” means “Come in out of the chaotic, senseless world. Come in here with us where it’s safe. You don’t have to worry about it or be anxious about it anymore. Just take it straight, like The Book says, and you’ll be okay from now on.” Never make fun of that. It is powerful, and on its own level it really does save. Hundreds of thousands of people grab onto that like they would grab a life raft in a raging sea. Suddenly out of chaos, craziness, lostness, confusion, and endless pain, they come upon something solid and clear and comforting. Their lives get organized. They find clear rules that do not shift or change. Their minds settle upon solid, undoubted, unchanging truth. Never make fun of that. And please understand: If anyone suggests to them that anything in The Book can be questioned – that there might be a flaw in the creed, that somebody else might see and believe things differently – such thoughts may not be entertained. To do so would crack the shield, and all the dark, chaos, turmoil, and confusion would come crashing back in. To them, Scripture is inerrant. Anything that suggests otherwise is satanic. Evidence is not relevant, just another ruse of Satan. It doesn’t matter to what degree we humans understand it; the important thing is to believe it. To them, that is our only protection against the darkness, the craziness, the evil. Never make fun of that. For many, many people, it is their link to sanity.

So what is *your* link to sanity? Lots of you think the fundamentalists (whether Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, or Republican) have stumbled into a Fool’s Paradise. But what is *your* link to sanity? You may have noticed by now that the fundamentalists aren’t stupid; people who have *no* faith really do live in chaos. The laws of the country, the frameworks of school and business and earning a living – even the fear of getting hurt or getting into trouble – provide a thin layer of order and purpose for some people, for a little while. But it is paper thin. People are back and forth, in and out, off and on to the standards set up by schools, government, and most other institutions in our culture. Many people seem to live by

whim, by the desires of the moment, by the lure of short-range advantage or opportunity. It really is chaos and darkness and pain out there, and more and more people get sucked into it the longer they live here. You may have a right to your own opinion, but if that is all you've got to live by, your life is out of control. So most of you have even more faith than you realize, and maybe you know a lot of wonderful people. You do if you come around here very much. But the world at large is not a kind or peaceful place. It really does go crazy, regularly. In my own lifetime, we have killed over seventy-five million people out of sheer pride, greed, and self-will run riot. You think that is the will of God? Millions have been tortured on purpose – as if life weren't hard enough already. Doesn't anybody know that hurting people is bad? A Fool's Paradise has its dangers, but a whole lot of the world has no Paradise at all.

We never know who will be touched next. For forty years I have been a pastor, and every time I turn around, somebody else is being hurt in one way or another. I hate it. The mountains are beautiful and the sea is glorious, but I hate it that life hurts so many people so badly. I want out and I never want to come back, and I have felt that way underneath since I was twelve years old. There *must* be a better place. And I want to see all of you in it. And because of Jesus, I truly believe that I will.

Only in very recent years have I come to believe that wanting out is not a proper or faithful stance for Christians. Our whole society, and even the church, has put far too much emphasis on how things are going in this world, and on how good or bad it may be for each of us at the moment. This world is not our home, and we really do live for a hope far beyond anything contained in this world. But it is wrong to let this world talk us out of the joy and peace of knowing God's presence, even here. The Holy God is here with us, and among us. It is good to be alive because God is with us, no matter what the circumstances. Knowing we may die at any moment is all the more reason to live for what we believe in most, and to rejoice in every bit of true life we can find, wherever we find it. The rest, as always, is in God's hands. So there is always a strange tension in our being here. On one plane, we feel sorrow, anger, defeat, and dismay at all the unnecessary chaos, evil, pain, and negation of God and life. But at the very same time, on another plane, we are aware that everything is just fine. Not only does God remain God – and not only does the Eternal Kingdom continue to draw us beyond all the negations that are possible here – but even here, God keeps bringing victory out of defeat ... life out of death ... joy out of sorrow. But bigger even than *that* is the sheer joy of

knowing God – of being with God. And that is just as possible here and now as anywhere else. So which realm we find ourselves in at the moment is no longer a great issue. All realms belong to God. That is what no fundamentalist knows.

So what is your link to sanity? Many of you have spent some years during which the Christian Faith seemed like a vague but comforting message off on the fringes of life. Sometimes you doubted it, and sometimes you appreciated it. Easter, Christmas, eternal life, being good, and helping your neighbors all seemed like a good thing. What harm could it do, in any case? So it was worth a little time, from time to time – worth a few dollars even. When friends got married or kids were born or people faced hard times, it was good to be able to go to church, or to have caring people gather around.

And Jesus? Well, He sort of came with the package. And He must have been a pretty good guy if so many people still remembered Him after all these years – kind of a Robin Hood of prayer, and probably pretty wise and kind in lots of ways. Sad that He had such a hard life. But you thought it was nice that He had become such a positive symbol of hope and faith and love. And most people were better off believing in Him, or at least believing in a better life like the one He stood for. So maybe all the details weren't perfectly clear, and some of the claims and titles and creeds were maybe a little overenthusiastic. But for the most part, it was a good thing and worth our support, at least as long as it stayed positive and reasonable.

Now, I'm not implying that any of you still feel this way today. But many of you can remember living through a period when this was not very far from the way you felt about Christianity. If that is the essence of liberal Christianity, no wonder the church is the way it is: with Christmas pageants being more important than prayer or evangelism; with attendance and tithing records being so sporadic; with more emphasis on the world's troubles than on having a right relationship with God. In any case, like me, most of you cannot be fundamentalists. You may honor the Bible for its content – for the Message it carries – but it is not a book that stands as absolute and unerring authority over you. And when you do start moving to more serious considerations of religion or the spiritual life, it is the person of Jesus, the presence of the Holy Spirit with you, and the reality of God that matter to you, and the Bible is important only because it has information about such things.

But many of us – most of us ... all of us – have come to the place where we know too much, and where too much has happened in our lives for us to go on treating Christianity or Jesus or His church like a sideshow. Familiar words and strange concepts have started coming into focus and looking very different – claiming far more than we had realized before, and calling us to dedication and devotion we had never even considered before. Jesus can no longer be understood as merely the Western World's mascot. It is all a huge hoax, a horrid lie ... or Jesus truly is the Messiah: Jesus, Lord and Christ!

But right at that very juncture in our lives, we start wondering if we are crazy. Have we been brainwashed, conditioned, hoodwinked – either by accident, or on purpose? Have we perhaps been taken in by a very big fantasy story? Is everybody pretending, like they do about Santa Claus, because they know it's "good for people" to have hope – and, you know, think about kindness and love – whether it's really true or not? Are we into some Fool's Paradise? Are we taking it all too seriously, when it's only a good story – one of the world's best fantasies?

Why would anybody get truly excited about Jesus? And would any of us trust Him enough to really organize our whole lives around Him – dedicating our time and our resources to the temporary, time-locked "church" that tries to carry His Message and His WAY in a tenuous, broken world like ours? Is it a Fool's Paradise to imagine that we have found such a truth, discovered such a Leader, stumbled onto a LIFE that has true significance and meaning and hope? Because if we have found such a Leader, then everything we have to offer or contribute to His purpose – to His Kingdom – will be asked of us. What's more, we will want to give it, and we will want to go on giving it.

If you die on a cross, there is only one way you will ever recover: Resurrection. If you give your life and your heart to Jesus, there is only one way you will ever recover: Same way. For Jesus, that was the only Way He truly cared about. The rest was okay if it came, and okay if it went. And some of us want to be like Him. God help us, more and more we want to be like Him.

FOOL'S GOAL

You know what fool's gold is. It is bright and sparkly. It looks like we think gold ought to look. But it is not worth anything. That is, it has none of the properties of true gold. You cannot purify it, smelt it, melt or shape it into anything useful. It just flakes out and falls apart. So you can work just as hard looking for, gathering, and storing fool's gold as real gold. You can even feel quite successful because it is easier to find. But after all your efforts, you have nothing valuable. It is, to revive an old phrase, *a waste of time and life*.

Yes, well, the way to end up in a Fool's Paradise is to go after Fool's Goal. A Fool's Goal, like fool's gold, appears to be valuable at first glance. But on closer examination, it has no true worth. When you try to use it or call on it, it flakes out and falls apart. Yet many people are fascinated, hoodwinked, spellbound for years by Fool's Goal. Some people even die with piles of Fool's Goal stored away, just as some miners died with a pile of fool's gold hidden away. They thought they were rich, and maybe that was comforting. But it was the comfort of ignorance.

Jesus often tried to awaken His followers to the dangers of Fool's Goal. Some of us do not awaken easily. The comfort of ignorance sometimes seems more appealing than the reality of reordering our lives. Nevertheless, Jesus spoke of amassing wealth, storing up grain in barns, putting too much store in things that moth or rust or thieves could take away. Some people think that means we should get better mothballs, use more rust-resistant paint, and build safer banks. But that misses Jesus' point. *"But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."* (Luke 12:20-21)

Ending up in a Fool's Paradise comes from going after Fool's Goal. It leaves us bereft and empty. Of course, even real gold can be a Fool's Goal. Gathering gold for no purpose beyond itself is turning a resource into a goal – turning a means to an end, into an end in itself. It happens a lot. Like getting an education without any love for knowledge, spending years acquiring information without any intention of using it for some genuine benefit. What is the purpose of a postage stamp? To send messages to people – communication. But I knew a guy with a three-million-dollar stamp collection who hardly ever communicated anything to anybody.

FOOL'S GOAL

Why have a stamp if you do not want to mail a letter? Well, theoretically, you can turn it into gold. But why have gold? The world is full of Fool's Goal: desires that have no object; resources that have no purpose; potential that does not know there is anything to live for. *"But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."*

So all of us know that we are in danger – whenever we get careless – of going after Fool's Goal. And if we do that for very long, we end up in a Fool's Paradise. But I am particularly interested in our being aware, and staying aware, of such issues in this church. If this particular faith family does not stay awake and aware of such things, we will not be a church for very long. We want to support and help and walk with each other on the Christian WAY. That is not easy in our world. There are endless efforts to draw us off the Path, almost as if some Satan were trying to sell us Fool's Goal on purpose. I hope more and more of you believe it, and conduct yourselves accordingly.

So what is at stake? Every time I try to mention who we are and what we need to be about, some of you get nervous because such remarks could be interpreted as putting down other churches. I don't like that either. I try to keep it to a minimum. But our vision and purpose really do need to be better than those of many other churches. Just because some of them go after Fool's Goal does not mean we should also – just to keep friendly, or just to prove that we don't know the difference between love and tolerance. Anyway, I will try not to make a big deal out of that part of it, if you won't.

The biggest and most dangerous Fool's Goal in the American church today is the effort to improve the world and help others, without being changed ourselves. Every single time we participate in the church, join a committee, work on a project, try to engage in any deeds of love or compassion – if we think the purpose is to help others without our being changed, we are going after Fool's Goal. You know the attitude: *They* are the ones who need help. *They* are the ones who need to change. *They* are the ones who need God – who need to pray more – who need to be cleaned up, and educated, and taught to behave better.

Christianity is never about "they" and "them." It is always about "me" and "us." You can never improve the world in any way – no matter how large or small – unless you are willing to be changed yourself. The

very essence of Christianity is about being reborn, converted, transformed: remade in the image of Christ. Not them – us. When we forget about it for ourselves, we forget about it for others. Then we go into endless efforts that can only be called “Band-Aiding” – messing around on the surface without ever getting to what matters. Fool’s Goal! We think it glitters. We think it looks good. Anything that seems so nice and caring must be valuable. On closer examination, it flakes out and falls apart.

The twin sister of this first Fool’s Goal is the belief that we can improve the outside without improving the inside. Jesus tried again and again to warn us against this false goal. *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of extortion and rapacity.”* (Matthew 23:25) *“And he called the people to him again, and said to them, ‘Hear me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him.’”* (Mark 7:14-15) *“The good man out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure produces evil; for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.”* (Luke 6:45) *“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.”* (Matthew 15:19-20) Yet more and more the church focuses on externals: How much? How many? What’s the body count? The society around us thinks in such terms. Therefore, we are always being asked questions from such a perspective. And if our answers don’t sound very good in our own ears, we start to get nervous or feel embarrassed. Do we care about being judged from a worldly perspective? Or do we care about pleasing our Lord?

More and more of you are helping to move this church into a very different stance and fellowship. I cannot say enough to thank you, or tell you how much and how deeply I appreciate it. But I can try to encourage it, and keep hoping that this direction will continue to get clearer and stronger among us – in every board and committee meeting; in every casual conversation, and in personal prayer; in every congregational meeting that makes decisions and sets direction; in all of our life together. We do not care how many people come here. We care about what happens to those who do. We are not trying to change the world. We are trying to live the Christian Life ourselves. We do not think Jesus is a good idea for others so that they will be nicer to us. We think Jesus is our own Lord and Savior. If sometimes we cannot help sharing Him with others who

seem like they would love to know Him, or like they know Him but do not have many other friends who do, that is understandable. But we try not to confuse the reality with what overflows from it. And while it is wonderful, and often inspiring, to see others changing, we want to be more faithful, more obedient, more loving *ourselves*. We also want to keep growing closer to God in Christ Jesus – the words are always inadequate, but we want more and more to worship, to praise, to know, to honor ... God.

Paul is talking to his Philippian friends along these same lines, if I hear him. He does not encourage them to go for the dazzle. He does not care if they are famous in the world. He wants them to go on in steady, faithful Christian Life and service.

There is a very big difference between being a *church* and being a weekend religious club. A strong weekend religious club can be pretty good, in a way. And lots of them have a few people at their core who are part of the church. But being the church is not the essence or purpose of the weekend religious clubs that dot our landscape. A weekend religious club is focused on its own programs, its success in the world, its image and reputation in the world. A *church* cares far more about the life of its people – where they work, where they live, and how they are doing as Jesus' disciples wherever they are, whatever they are doing.

The people of Jesus Christ are just as much the church on Monday and Tuesday (and every other day) as they are on Sunday. People who belong to a weekend religious club may bring some of the skills they learn on Monday and Tuesday – and some of the money they earn on Monday and Tuesday – to the club they attend on Sunday. But for many of them, Sunday is one thing, and life during the week is a very different matter. But Christians are at least as interested in living for Jesus during the week as they are in living for Him on Sunday. They try as hard to worship on Thursday as they do on Sunday. It may be a relief or a joy to be among Christian friends, to gain some refreshment and renew perspective, on Sunday. But the work of the church is not what our world calls “church work.” The work of the church is the people of Jesus Christ alive in the world. And no matter what they are engaged in, their aim (their purpose) is to be obedient and faithful to their Lord – at that very time, in that very activity and situation. Of course, they are aware that they constantly fall short of this goal. That is why they are always trying to grow and change. That is why they know it is necessary to pray every day, to keep reading the Bible, and to keep taking the bit out of their teeth and

turning back to the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Only, the changing is wonderful, and the presence of the Holy Spirit is marvelous.

So you can go to a religious club. You can attend its performances. You can be part of the audience whenever you want. But you cannot *go* to church. Church is not about an audience; it is about a congregation – a faith family – a disciple band. You either *are* the church, or you have no concept of what church means: the *ecclesia* – the people of Jesus – the body of Christ. And nobody, no outside force on earth, can keep you from being the church. No failure or disappointment or mistake can keep you from being the church. You can desert if you choose to. But that is the only way out. Just as accepting Jesus' love and mercy is the only way in.

We have a weekend religious club here at this address. But it is only a front. Some people love the club because it has been here a long time, they are used to it, and they have poured a lot of time and money and love into it. But most of you love the club because it is a front for the church, and you know some of what is going on behind the facade. We live in a physical world, and so the club is useful to us and helpful to some of our deeper purposes. But more and more of us need to know and remember that the club is here to serve the church – that the club has no purpose of its own except to serve the church – and that the church belongs to Jesus Christ.

A small illustration, though not unimportant: The club needs money to survive. It needs money to do most anything, like any other institution in this physical world. Now, suppose the club realizes that its West Room is in a shambles and needs painting and repairs and some new equipment. Or maybe it thinks it could accomplish more if it had an associate pastor. But let's stay with the West Room for the moment. So the club needs more money. We all know there are techniques, approaches, and methods that are perfectly legitimate in this world by which we can attempt to raise money. Moreover, if done well, they usually work – that is, they bring in money. Therefore, when the club needs more money, it will always loom as a possibility that we should “go raise the money.”

The problem is, if behind the religious club we are actually a church, then there is only one authentic way to raise money. And that is to raise the congregation's level of faith – their love for Jesus – their awareness of why the church exists and how important it really is. Then they will give because it is the life they live, the thing they want to do, an act of devotion and allegiance to God. That is authentic stewardship, and it

truly builds the life and mission of the church. But if the money comes not out of love and allegiance to Jesus, but out of pressure and manipulation from the outer world, then the West Room may look fantastic, but we have gone against our real reason for being here: the soul growth of our people. We tried to take a shortcut. We tried to get it before we wanted it for the right reason. In the long run, we cannot win that way. We can rationalize and hope that the West Room will now be useful to meetings and programs that will bring soul growth. But we have already proved that we are not patient enough to trust and build our life around what we really believe to be important. So it will never become truly important among us. Whenever there is a need or an issue, we will revert to the ways of the world instead of staying faithful to the ways of our Lord. So our people will never learn to give because they belong to Jesus and wish to serve Him. They will only give when they feel the pressure of the world and decide to respond to the world's motives.

A second illustration is too close on the heels of the first not to mention. I can tell you these things – say these things – and mean them with all of my heart. And I can try my best to influence the decisions of this church to match this WAY of Life. But if you do not see it yourselves and choose it as a congregation because you believe it too, then I have accomplished nothing. Isn't that right? Getting my way – even getting the majority vote – doesn't mean a thing unless it truly reflects your minds and hearts too. Until our hearts change, all outside behavior – no matter how correct – is only a temporary fix. It will revert back to the old ways very quickly.

And now I remind you: While I think about such matters all the time in relationship to our religious club, it is your task to think about such principles and choices all the time in relationship to your work in the outer world. I have it easier – I can at least appeal to our Way in Christ Jesus. Most of you cannot do that where you work. Nevertheless, you are the church no matter where you go. And though you have to be discerning about when and where you use the language of the church, nevertheless it is your life to carry the Spirit of our Lord into every place you go, and into everything you do. We are never willing to promote success at the expense of the LIFE we believe in and try to live.

So, if we imagine some well-fed, well-clothed person living in a lovely house, but they have no character, no vision – if they have no stamina and cannot keep a promise; if they blow about with every wind, opinion,

and desire that comes down the road; if they will betray any precept or person if it seems to them convenient or might get them what they think they want – can such a person be what the church is trying to produce and encourage? Yet many religious clubs operate as if this were just fine. Fix the body, never mind the soul. A great many of our programs to help people are designed as if this were a perfectly legitimate and desirable outcome. Fix the body, never mind the soul.

To be sure, the invitations to real LIFE all come from God. God is Creator – Author – and all true authority comes from God. Mercy and grace ... love and life ... forgiveness and purpose – it all depends upon God, and God must lead the Way and give these things to us first, or we have no chance to discover any of it.

But in the end, Heaven depends upon us. That is, Heaven is a community, and it is made up of individuals. The quality of Life there – no matter how high and beautiful the dimensions, no matter how much potential God has built into it – the quality of Life there depends upon the character and spirit of those who live there.

Grace lets us grow and change and learn from where we are. Forgiveness keeps giving us new chances. But we cannot escape it, can we? Inevitably and indubitably, Heaven and the quality of Life there will depend upon who we really are on the inside: on how much we truly love the good; on how authentically we are faithful and obedient to our Lord; on how much we are willing to risk giving ourselves and all the gifts and abilities we have been blessed with.

Will we truly love each other and go on appreciating the value and worth of each other, overlooking the remaining flaws, while we continue to grow, and change, and learn eternally? Ah yes, Life is bigger than we think. For in Heaven, we pick up from where we left off here. And eternity has possibilities and dimensions we cannot yet imagine.

If the hope of the Christian Life is real, then it is ludicrous to believe that life here is most important for the ways we are adjusting and manipulating the outside: the houses; the hairdos; the property and possessions; the titles and prominence. All of it has its place. And it is, after all, the only training ground we have at the moment in which to train our souls. So the way we deal with the outside is always showing us how we are really doing on the inside. But thinking the outside is the reality – the true aim and purpose – means the soul goes dormant and stops

FOOL'S GOAL

developing. When we track Jesus' approaches, His thought-life, His methods and teachings, the way He dealt with individuals – it all points to this same reality: God in Christ Jesus cares about the children awakening to their true inner selves – and starting the long pilgrimage toward authentic love and LIFE that well-up from within. And Jesus kept saying and showing that we must not waver from this goal, no matter how much pressure and mayhem this world brings against us, or how strongly Satan tries to tempt us to turn aside or go after lesser goals.

When we deal with other people and when we deal with ourselves, we are dealing with God's children – children of eternity. In the long run, the rules do not matter. They are only hints to get us started. In the long run, it depends on what comes from the heart – from within – from who we have truly become. It is almost impossible to keep remembering this. It is absolutely imperative that we keep remembering this. Otherwise we turn off our pilgrimage, and turn aside from the Christian Path and Way.

It is Fool's Goal to make any *thing* in this world our true priority, our highest goal, our reason for living. The inner being – the character, the soul – is what matters. We are after true wisdom – authentic love – motives and choices that come from within and honor what we really care about. We want life and behavior, attitudes and actions that are truly in line with Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Otherwise, when we get to Heaven, we will ruin it – and shortly find ourselves in a place no better than this one. Or maybe you think the fundamentalists are right: that God cannot afford to let us into Heaven in the first place, unless we get perfect here. I know that means there is no room for me. Besides, how do you get *perfect* here, for a realm as vast as eternity?

FOOL'S ESCAPE

I made a suggestion via the newsletter last month that you start reading Paul's letters to the Philippians and the Colossians. The present sermon series on "Fool's Paradise" is coming from those letters, and for some reason I hope you are realizing that.

While I often long to teach, I have little desire to get very scholarly with you. It is the nature of scholarship to pay more and more attention to minute details, and less and less attention to significance and meaning. Scholars, like scientists, focus on facts – on objective evidence. But as I keep reminding you, a million facts cannot add up to a single truth. They cannot even add up to anything meaningful. The moment you posit anything significant or meaningful, you have made a subjective judgment. You have made a leap of faith from fact to something you care about. Caring is neither objective nor scientific. Clearly, it is foolish not to pay attention to facts. But if we never risk jumping from facts to caring, meaning, commitment, then we are not even alive yet. We are just objects – things – stuck on a meaningless level of objective thinking.

Scholars struggle to determine: Was the letter to the Colossians written from Ephesus, or Rome? Was it written in A.D. 55, or 62? They even write books and papers, give lectures, and argue with each other over whether or not Paul was actually the author. I would like to know also. I hope they figure it out some day. I'm glad they are trying to be objective about it. But while I'm interested in the facts, I am not in it *for* the facts. I care about living the LIFE. So do you. Sometimes I bring you facts if they are interesting. And I certainly want us to stay connected with our traditions and history – connected with Jesus Christ – so we do not get so subjective that we float off into woo-woo theories that we make up as we go. By the way, that was the problem at Colossae. Humans are inventive and creative, and they like to make contributions to things they care about. The Colossians were contributing so much, Paul didn't think it had much to do with Jesus Christ anymore. They were going off in directions they thought were superior to just plain, old, simple Christian Faith and Life and devotion. And Paul thought they were going where Jesus was not leading, and where Jesus did not want His people to go.

Philippi was across the Aegean Sea – across from what we now know as Turkey – in what we now know as Greece. It was the first Christian church in Europe. It was also Paul's favorite church, the most supportive, the least contentious, the most down-to-earth and faithful. A lot of that

was due to its first convert and chief layperson, Lydia. Even this letter was written to thank the Philippians for a gift Epaphroditus had brought from them to sustain Paul while he was in prison. They had been supporting Paul's ministry with help and encouragement from their beginning.

Colossae had nothing directly to do with Philippi. Colossae was back across the Aegean Sea in Turkey, one hundred miles east of Ephesus. Colossae was on the main road from Ephesus to the Euphrates River – meaning, on the way to anywhere east. Kind of like Palm Springs was to Los Angeles in the old days; nobody would go there except you had to go through there to get out of here. A lot of kooky people lived in Colossae, and they were sure that being out of the mainstream meant they were superior to the mainstream. On top of that, the Lycus Valley was fertile and grew a lot of great sheep with a particularly fine quality of wool.

The Philippian church was founded by Paul on his second missionary journey. The Colossian church was founded by Epaphras during Paul's third missionary journey. Epaphras, a native of Colossae, had been converted to Christianity by Paul when Epaphras was in Ephesus. Paul then sends him back to his home town to start a church there. Maybe to you those are facts. To me it is drama. At this point in the story, that has been going on all over Greece and Turkey. Paul is not trying to do it all; he is sending a wider and wider circle of friends to start churches everywhere. (Cf. Luke 9, 10) On the way back to Jerusalem after the third missionary journey, Paul could not stop anywhere without finding a church that knew him, welcomed him, and honored him – places we do not even connect with the story or think he had ever visited before (Troas, Miletus, Patara, Tyre, Ptolemais, Caesarea).

Not everyone is as bold as Paul, so he sends some of them to places where they are already known, like Epaphras to his own home town. The trouble is, you do not have as much authority in your own home town. "*A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country.*" (Matthew 13:57; Mark 6:4) So Epaphras does well – he does indeed start a church in Colossae. But they are forerunners to Congregationalists. They are individualists, and they do not stick very closely to the Message that Epaphras brings them. They appreciate the stimulus and take it from there, making it up as they go. Eventually, Epaphras returns to Paul, deeply concerned about the direction in which things are going. Then back comes this letter from Paul saying, "I'm glad you folks are there, and you're doing some good things, and doubtless trying hard and meaning well. But if you will allow me – I'd like to straighten you guys out. You're getting pretty far off course." Paul's letter strengthens

Epaphras' authority. He will need it in the future, no doubt. Paul sends Tychicus to deliver the letter personally – an outside expert who will stay for a while to teach and discuss matters until things get a little clearer. Paul cannot come yet because he is in prison, but the suggestion is clear that he may visit soon. With Tychicus comes Onesimus, a runaway slave from Colossae. Philemon, his former master, is a member of the Colossian church also.

Anyway, letters to the Philippians and the Colossians appear next to each other in the New Testament. They have no other direct connection, except I think Paul wrote both letters at about the same time. Both letters come from prison – from Rome, or possibly Ephesus. Paul trusts and loves the Philippians, and is deeply concerned for the Colossians. Joy and gratitude and encouragement to the Philippians. Encouragement to the Colossians too, but swimming in correction, admonishment, and strong wake-up calls. Which letter do we need more today? I mean each of us individually, on this very day, which letter do we need more?

If we just pass our eyes over Paul's letters, they are not very thrilling or compelling. We get some interesting word pictures, some catchy phrases sometimes – when Paul warms to his subject. But if we do not see Epaphras – trudging up the road to Ephesus, distraught and weeping for his friends in Colossae – then that letter is not going to talk to us very compellingly. If we read Colossians and it does not suddenly switch, transpose, and come into focus again as we think of all the syncretism, loose morals, and wild theories that are tearing up the church in our own time, then it no longer seems very necessary for us as Christians to read the Scriptures each day, “seeking in grace and praise to discover God's will for our own lives on a daily basis.” We either take it literally without understanding, or we neglect it altogether. Then we end up like the Colossians: well-meaning in our own way, but not grounded or faithful in Christ's Way.

I like the Philippian letter better, of course. The prose in places is marvelous. But the situation at Colossae calls forth from Paul a most incredible string of distilled theological affirmations. Even the little piece of the letter we read today simply ripples with affirmations that we love: *“In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness of life in him ... a circumcision made without hands – putting off the body of flesh.”* Wow, has he taken that imagery up some levels! *“Buried with him in baptism ... raised with him through faith ... having forgiven all our trespasses ... canceling the charges against us ... nailing them to the cross.”* You have been training for years not to react, but that

must have brought the Colossians right out of their seats. *“He disarmed the principalities and powers.”* The image is a fencing match. Jesus does not kill them – it is not His Way. But suddenly their swords are gone, flown from their hands. They cannot hurt you anymore (unless you listen to their lies). *“Let no one pass judgment on you ... let no one disqualify you ... hold fast to the Head ... grow with the growth that is from God.”*

It is a complex situation at Colossae, just like the one you live with and live in all the time. “Syncretism” means the attempt to create new religions out of different combinations of old religions. Epaphras has not been able to establish Christ Jesus as the central authority at the church in Colossae. They hear enough to become a gathered community; they are inspired by parts of the Message. But they are keeping some Jewish rites (circumcision) as outranking Christ’s mercy. They are keeping some pagan rituals they like a lot. They are mixing it all together and adding some touches of their own, and doubtless they are doing it in all sincerity. They feel themselves capable of constructing a higher spiritual wisdom than less-advanced types have known before. We do love to be superior, don’t we? “Christ delivered our spiritual nature from sin,” they say, “but it is not enough. We are still imprisoned in the physical world by hostile powers, and we need the help of angelic beings: spirit guides, mystic charms, special diets, rigorous disciplines, esoteric observances. To gain true freedom, we must go beyond Jesus. Or at least we are the elite, who know secret mysteries and special methods that He did not reveal to most people.”

To all of which Paul says, “Baloney!” Christ is preeminent. Christ is the highest authority – God’s WAY of saving us. Never mind the fancy footwork or the dazzling spiritual theories. Do not try to out-fox Satan with special heroics of holier-than-thou spiritual disciplines, or rituals of superior discernment. It takes Satan about thirty seconds to turn all that stuff against you – and *for* him. Stay humble. Keep grounded. Be faithful to Jesus. Trust God’s love. Live simple, devout lives of praise and service. Be careful not to let your spiritual gifts and awareness trick you into thinking you are above the requirements of honest morality. Tell the truth. Keep your promises. Stay true to the people you love. Never think that your fleeting desires or pleasures are more important than truth, or more important than people – people are God’s eternal children. Use things, love people – and never reverse it. Jesus’ love does not mean we can do anything we feel like, whether it hurts others or not. We are free from the Law because we know we must do better than it asks, not worse.

Paul had an amazing gift for comprehending deep theological truths and principles, yet seeing their application in concrete, straightforward ways. It must have been his Jewish background and training. He could start a thought with the numinous God, mystery beyond comprehension ... track it to God's revelation in Jesus Christ ... see it acted out in His death and resurrection ... and end up with a very practical, mundane admonition to work hard, stay honest, and stop screwing around – all smoothly connected, and in a way that has helped the rest of us see that it really is all connected.

As you know, or at least I think you know, Paul did not write the Bible. Paul did not write the New Testament. There was no New Testament during Paul's entire lifetime, or for over two hundred years afterward. The only things Paul ever wrote were letters to his friends. He cared about Jesus and the Christian Way of Life. His letters were included in our New Testament purely and simply because so many people found them helpful. People knew they lived better, thought straighter, and found themselves closer to Jesus in both prayer and behavior if they paid attention to Paul. Many of his letters were lost, but some were saved, collected, copied, and put into the lists of the most helpful writings of the early faith community. Generations later, these most-helpful writings were canonized – set apart from all the other writings as the most trustworthy and helpful we had. That is how we got our Bible – not a lightning bolt from the Holy Mountain. They came up from the ranks, proving themselves helpful and useful to people like us who wanted to walk the Path – who wanted to live the Christian Way. The writings are not holy because they are perfect. They are preserved because they proved themselves helpful to people who loved Jesus and wanted to live the Christian Life themselves. I keep running into people who do not know this. I even run into people who, being totally ignorant of such things themselves, are determined to tell others all about it. If somebody tells you that the Bible is holy because it has no mistakes or errors in it, that is not a statement of faith *or* fact. It is a statement of belief born from fear and ignorance. The Bible is holy because it speaks of holy things. But it does not get us off the hook. It does not make our decisions for us. We still have to learn to obey the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ ourselves, in our own lives – just like the people who wrote the New Testament were trying to do. Otherwise, The Book is for nothing. So I remind you, on occasion, even of some lowly facts.

Enough background, on to the sermon. When we have a problem, the two most famous and familiar “solutions” we humans try are typified in the phrase “Fight or flight.” Kill it, or run away. The more civilized we become, the more “fight” is frowned upon. As individuals, we cannot kill

or beat up our problems without getting into serious trouble, even if we win. So more and more, individuals feel that flight is the only recourse when things seem really bad. When there was trouble in this church a few years back, a great many people responded by leaving. Hordes of people solve their marital problems by a technique called “divorce.” In AA, we look back and laugh, sometimes nervously, at how many of us tried what is called “a geographic”: If things get really bad – move. Don’t stop drinking, of course. Go where it takes new people a little while to figure out what you’re like and what you’re doing. Change schools, change jobs, change wives, change friends, change churches, change houses, change communities. You can all give me instances and illustrations of times when such changes were wise and seemed to work. I know some too. But mostly it is just running away. And all we discover is that “No matter where you go, there you are.” You can divorce a spouse or a job or a friend, but how do you divorce yourself? Some people think suicide will do it, but they are mistaken. You only go from one realm to another realm – and no matter where you go, there you are. Ultimately we are stuck with ourselves, and if we don’t like it, sooner or later we have to grow and change. Theologically, the reason there is so much “distance,” so much animosity, between us and God is because God loves us – and we do not. Next to that, we keep trying to get God to change the outside (gimme, gimme, gimme), and God waits patiently for us to be willing to change the inside (grow, transcend, convert, trust).

Sin *means* alienation, separation, estrangement – running away. Ninety percent of the time or more, running away is falling into Satan’s trap. Like in any nightmare, as long as you are willing to run, it keeps getting worse. Fool’s Escape! A Fool’s Paradise is to want and head for what is ludicrous to begin with, or to believe in what is absurd in the first place. Fool’s Goal is to keep setting priorities and goals all along the way that only lead toward a Fool’s Paradise. **Fool’s Escape is to believe we can get what we want by running away from everything we do not like – including ourselves.**

You know all this. But what seems to surprise some people is that the church itself is frequently tempted to try Fool’s Escape, just like everybody else. Even more troublesome, it often teaches that this is a good and holy thing to do. I hope to persuade you to be really careful about any form of Fool’s Escape.

At first glance, turning away always seems like a logical solution, with compelling arguments. Add to that the fact that we are rational creatures, capable of endless rationalization. Then put us into an

uncomfortable, difficult, unfair, painful situation – and presto! Fool's Escape. The most powerful story I know on this theme is Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Only, in the end He would not run away. One of the many reasons why I know He is the Christ, and different from me, is that I never read that story without wishing He would run. I still don't think we are worth it, yet He does. I happen to believe that every other human on the face of the earth, if put in that situation, would have run. Well, there are a few who have not run since, but only because *He* did not run, and they are trying to be faithful.

Anyway, we are more than animal, more than physical. We are spirit beings, children of God. And when we awaken to that – to the presence and love of the Holy Spirit – and when we start experiencing the friendship of others who are aware of the Spirit also, then one way or another, a church begins to form. Then we get this tremendous urge to get out of the world – to live in a community that knows and lives a better way. We want to separate ourselves and our children from all the mayhem and mendacity going on “out there.” The whole monastic movement of Christendom bears witness to this. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could start our own company, and everybody in it would live the higher life? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could start a community somewhere, and only the good people could come live there? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could run away from this world, at least all the bad and painful parts?

The classic Scripture passage is in Second Corinthians: *“Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness? What agreement does Christ have with Beliar? Or what does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore come out from them and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, and I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.”* (II Corinthians 6:14-18; compare with Isaiah 52:11; Ezekiel 20:34, 41; II Samuel 7:8, 14)

History is replete with sincere efforts to do this very thing, some of them quite heroic: The Desert Fathers in the second century A.D. Augustine inspired many with his book, *The City of God*. Many of the popes were trying it in Rome. Luther was trying it in parts of Germany; Calvin in Geneva. Our Pilgrim forebears risked everything they had, and over half of them lost their lives that first year, trying it at Plymouth.

Every Christian denomination and group secretly, or not so secretly, believes that the world would be a wonderful place if they could just convert everybody to join their particular church. Meanwhile, most people want an oasis from the world more than they want to be the church in the world. At least I do. There is no doubt about it – that is my desire. My problem and your problem is that we keep praying. God is not about a Fool's Paradise, or Fool's Goal, or a Fool's Escape. I believe God wants us to have strong faith communities of support and love and learning, but God also keeps sending us back into the world. Conversion always ends in assignment – vocation. Off the mountain and back into the fray.

So, you may not know how seriously and sincerely I mean this. And you must decide for yourself if it is as important to the Christian Life and Way as I am claiming. But:

1.) Never ever leave a marriage unless you feel very, very certain that the Holy Spirit is asking you to go.

2.) Never leave a job unless you are truly convinced that the Holy Spirit is opening a door for you to go into a new endeavor. (Very likely a tougher one.)

3.) Never move to a new community, a new church, or a new school unless you are as certain as humans can get that God is initiating the change – calling you to it.

People are running willy-nilly all over the landscape in our society, deciding what is good for them as if they had wisdom enough to know. Meanwhile, they are interrupting God's plans, and destroying things just before they might have come to fruition. God does not quit on us. God starts over with a new plan. But even God needs time to get things lined up, to get the right players in the right place at the right time, to time things so they can really happen. If we are all running away from everything that bothers us – making vast changes on whim and fancy – it is hard for even God to get any work done. Besides, where are we running to? Do we really believe we can get away from who we are? If we put it back into God's hands, we can become who we really are. That never happens by Fool's Escape. We only end up with a Fool's Goal in a Fool's Paradise.

Colossians 1:24-29; 2:6-8
John 18:33-38

FOOL'S TRUTH

Pilate entered the praetorium again and called Jesus, and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me; what have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world." Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"

There is perhaps no greater illustration of miscommunication anywhere in human writing than this account of a conversation between Jesus of Nazareth, carpenter of Galilee, and Pontius Pilate, Roman prefect of Judea. Pilate has no idea what Jesus is talking about. Jesus doesn't try very hard to get on common ground, seeing that the ground between them is so far apart. Yet Jesus' life is at stake, and Pilate doesn't really want to order His death. A very strange interlude in the world's most famous story.

The problem is that Jesus is not coming out of nowhere. He is not representing something that can be pinpointed in a specific moment, in one historic incident, on one calendar day. He comes out of a two-thousand-year tradition, a holy history of God at work in the world – God working in and through a special people set aside for this very purpose. Pilate wants to know, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate has no idea what that means. Sadly, *most* of the Jewish kings had no idea what that was supposed to mean. What Pilate is trying to find out is: "Are you an insurrectionist? Are you a nutso zealot with delusions of grandeur who needs to be exterminated before you get a lot of people hurt?"

What does Pilate know of Abraham? Of Moses, or the Holy Mountain, or the Covenant? What does Pilate know of the Promises, or of David, or of the string of holy prophets who kept turning the people back to their vision and purpose for a thousand years? And now Jesus stands before Pilate in culmination of all of this – but also of God's dramatic new

move to continue all that has been carried at so great a cost, through so many years. Only, nobody sees this clearly yet. It isn't even Easter! How is Jesus supposed to communicate any of this to Pilate – under these circumstances – in five minutes or less?

What can Jesus say to Pilate? “Forgive me, Pilate, but you have absolutely no concept of what is going on here. No offense, Pilate, but spiritually speaking, you are almost totally illiterate. The highest thoughts – the highest allegiance you have ever thought about in your entire lifetime – concern a mere, puny, self-centered human being sitting on a throne in what you think is a really grand palace in Rome. I am sent from – and my commission comes from – the numinous, omnipotent, omniscient Designer and Creator of the Universe. And while God cares about you and Rome and everything and everyone in the world far more than you know, God is not *impressed* by Rome, or your Emperor, any more than I am impressed by your authority. Rome does not understand what God is doing, and is not helping the world move in God's direction. Rome's grandeur and greatness are a temporary figment of your imagination. What I came for, and what I came about, will still be gathering strength and changing people's lives when your Empire is only a dim memory, studied by many only because I was here. And you, Pilate – you will be remembered for thousands of years, but only because you spoke with me.”

Can Jesus say this to Pilate? What good will it do? How can Pilate hear it? It is hopeless. Pilate seems so wealthy and strong. Jesus seems so poor and defenseless. Yet things are not always what they seem. Pilate's power and authority are unspeakably minuscule in comparison to Jesus' power and authority. In only six brief years, Pilate will be recalled from Judea in disgrace, his political career over. And only a few years after that, Pilate will stand with Jesus in a very different setting, with very different rules. What will Pilate say about truth then, when he experiences the compassion and mercy of the Prince of the Universe – and of dimensions far beyond any universe?

“*What is truth?*” Clearly Pilate asks this question to chide Jesus' naive comments. What Pilate means is, “There is no truth.” Truth is a subjective delusion. Truth is one person's opinion, based on hopes and dreams that have no basis in reality – at least not in any scientific or factual reality, or on anything empirically provable. And the truth is, our culture and our society have decided to side with Pilate on this, not with

Jesus. "Truth" is a bad word in our time. It is not politically correct to claim to know any truth. Our age is afraid or ashamed to claim any truth. What if it hurts somebody else's feelings? Even worse, what if it commits us to something?

When I say things like that, some of you think it is sarcasm, or mockery. Well, maybe just a touch. But I have a lot of sympathy for us also. It is not easy to live in a world that changes as fast as ours does. More than ever before, we have a need to stay versatile. You could wake up any morning and find out that some long-held understanding of reality has just been disproved. When I was a kid, the mountains were stable. It took millions of years to make them and millions more to wear them down, and we wanted men to match our mountains. Now whole mountain ranges can be formed in a few hundred years and maybe destroyed overnight, and the mountains match our teenagers. Today we want our men to match some pathetic feminine notion of what a man ought to be. What is truth? Whatever it is, it gives us vertigo.

You could wake up any morning and find out that your job is obsolete; that government grants will no longer support the arts; that your stocks have suddenly redefined your picture of retirement. There is no tenet of basic morality that has not changed its flavor and definition, either a little or a lot, in my brief lifetime. My father thought it was a privilege to pay income taxes – an honor to be a contributing citizen of this great country. My mother thought sex was for after marriage. My sister thought we went to school to see how much we could learn. My pastor thought we went to church to worship God. Can you imagine?! I hardly ever run into anybody who believes any of these things anymore. What is truth?

Even the concept of truth itself has changed dramatically in the last thirty years. Well, we have always connected truth with reality in some ways, but there used to be a level of truth far higher than that. "*O send out thy light and thy truth; let them lead me.*" (Psalm 43:3) "*God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.*" (John 4:24) Clearly, in such usage, "truth" is bigger than fact. "*Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life.'*" (John 14:6) Most of us are pretty sure that Jesus was talking about more than being accurate in math or physics.

Thirty years ago, the dictionary had among the definitions of truth: "a transcendent fundamental or spiritual reality ... an ideal or fundamental

reality apart from and transcending perceived experience.” In my current dictionary, all such dimensions are gone. “Truth” is “conformity to knowledge; ... most commonly used to mean correspondence with facts.” To be “truthful” (full of truth) today means you do not knowingly tell lies; you tell it like you see it at the moment. You think *that* is all it takes to be full of *truth* (truthful)?!

“A Psalm of David. O LORD, who shall sojourn in thy tent? Who shall dwell on thy holy hill? He who walks blamelessly, and does what is right, and speaks truth from his heart; who does not slander with his tongue, and does no evil to his friend, nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor; in whose eyes a reprobate is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD; who swears to his own hurt and does not change; who does not put out his money at interest, and does not take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things shall never be moved.” (Psalm 15) To which we would add: Of course he will never be moved; in our society, he would be dead in five minutes.

Fool's Truth. Any truth that is not God's Truth is Fool's Truth. It may help us to accomplish Fool's Goal, but it only leads us into a Fool's Paradise. “Let Pontius Pilate be your guide.” No, God help us, that is not what we want. We do long to find a truth and keep it – to live for it, and to honor it. “I would be true,” we used to sing. We wanted to hone in on values that lasted, on purposes we would never betray. Some of us still do.

Well, does Christianity – the Christian Path or Way – have anything to do with this? In a world that changes so fast, where our schedules are so busy, where we get weary, confused, betrayed, hurt – and also in a world where we get blessed, helped, befriended, valued – is it possible to find truth and live for it?

First of all (and I cannot stress this enough), Christianity expects you to fail – to fall short – from time to time. Who do you think you are?! *Where* do you think we are? Have you seen a sign somewhere announcing that we are already in Heaven? Christianity expects us to change our understanding of what God wants of us – as we walk the Path. Christianity expects us to be untrue, from time to time, no matter how much we may be determined and strive to be true. The essence of Christianity is not that we never goof, never stray, never fail, never betray our Lord. The essence of Christianity is that we repent – get right back to the Path. We do not like being wrong. We do not like being separated from God. We do not like displeasing our Lord. But we do not expect to be perfect.

We work and hope and strive to keep shortening the amount of time it takes us to repent and get back on track, to get back on the WAY.

J. Golden Kimball, perhaps the most colorful and certainly the most notorious Mormon to ever become an Elder in that church, had spent his early years as a cowboy in a rough and unsaintly environment. One of the things he never quite got cleaned up was his language. You can see why I felt an instant liking for the man. Everyone I have ever admired, except for my father, had a special gift with bad language (Jesus, Peter, Paul, Augustine, Luther, to name a few). Otherwise straitlaced Mormons enjoyed telling stories about J. Golden Kimball – especially after he was gone. One time, the Bishop sent him to preach in a church near Ogden where some of the younger men were getting a little rowdy. Kimball had a high, squeaky voice, but a commanding presence. He got into the middle of his sermon and suddenly remembered why the Bishop had sent him. “By the way,” he said, “the President tells me some of you young bucks are getting a little out of hand up here. He says you’re carrying six-shooters around in your hip pockets. I want you to be careful. The damn things might go off and blow your brains out.”

Kimball was high enough up in the Mormon church to get into some real political battles from time to time. One day he was speaking at a gathering where there was considerable controversy and contention. He commented: “You know, there are those who would like to kick me clear out of the church. But they can’t do it. I repent too damn fast.”

We are about to share in the communion meal – to partake of the body broken. Jesus’ body was broken – and we are the body of Christ. Does that sound like we are participating in something perfect here? His blood was poured out – shed for the remission of our sins. Does that sound like we are participating in something perfect here? Christianity is not about doing it right all the time, or *acting* like we are doing it right all the time. Christianity is not about getting perfect, or thinking we are perfect now – like maybe we made a few mistakes at first, back in the past, but we have gotten over it now. Life is bigger and more serious than that. Every time we make some progress on the WAY, we also start seeing some ways in which we are still wrong that we never noticed before. Christianity is not about getting perfect. Christianity is about learning how to *repent too damn fast*. That does not mean we do not get to live for the truth. It only means we keep turning back toward it – over and over and over again.

FOOL'S TRUTH

There is a lot of Fool's Truth out there. All of us have suckered in to some of it, from time to time. It is truth dedicated to mere survival, or dedicated to success in a world that seems big for the moment but which is so temporary you would think even humans could see through the ruse. Satan's whole art is choreography that hides the truth: short-term values, instant gratification, momentary fame, get-rich-quick schemes. How many get-rich-quick schemes have a serious intention of bringing benefit to others? How many one-night stands really care about the future or the welfare of the partner?

What is truth? God's love is truth. Get in tune with that love, and do anything you like (a paraphrase from St. Augustine). The way we usually say it is: "Turn your will and your life – all of it – over to the guidance and authority of the Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ." Why does it take us so long to get it clear? Prayer is the most steady, constant, unwavering connection we have to truth. Oh yes, we can play games with prayer, but we don't have to. God wants the link – the prayer connection. If we want it too, we can live for the truth. The problem – and we all know it – is not that the link doesn't work. The problem is that we keep breaking the link. So let us repent once again, and go back to the meal, and get re-linked.

TRUTH'S FOOL

We are almost at the end of our series regarding Fool's Paradise. One sermon to go. But before that, I thought we should take a little interlude, step aside to get our bearings, and maybe take time for an important reminder. There is such a thing as Fool's Truth, and a lot of the world is going off after it, most of the time. Most of us are going after it ourselves, at least some of the time. But not nearly as much as we used to.

But when we do not – when we find our truth and live for it – what then? Sometimes we don't ask; we don't want to picture or contemplate that very carefully. What *would* life be like if we did it right? Many people prefer to just unthinkingly assume that the landscape would then be slowly bathed in pastel shades, and we would drift in a quiet river of peace toward prosperity and loving relationships with all whom we met ... our children would be problemless and wonderful, our mates would never complain, our friends would all be true ... we would have plenty of time to do everything we really considered to be important ... and things would get better from there.

Why does Paul say, "*May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy*"? Is Paul wishing upon us a lot of junk we are never going to need? Somehow he expects us to be walking some kind of Path that does not lend itself to pastel shades. This is so hard to explain; if you didn't already know what I was driving at, it would not be possible to put into words.

Paul had a wonderful life. Few humans have ever exhibited more excitement and enthusiasm, more joy in friends, more appreciation and thankfulness for opportunities, more delight in his purpose and destiny. It is hard to imagine Paul waking up very many mornings with a depression that wanted to roll over and go back to sleep. Paul was vibrant, alive, and full of expectation and hope. And *for years* (meaning, no temporary wrinkle of cheap grace or counterfeit conversion) he carried his truth wherever he went – into whatever conditions he encountered – with a joy, a verve, a humble delight that dramatically attracted or dramatically repelled almost everyone who got close to him.

Some of you have listened to jaundiced views that picture Paul as a self-righteous, repressed, anti-female, judgmental jerk. Some people like

to read into others the problems they carry themselves. Nevertheless, we should remember that the strange tendency humans have to pull heroes off of pedestals has its reasons. We do need to protect ourselves from following false gods and false role models. If nobody looks beneath the shining armor, sometimes you get a Jim Jones or a Hitler. But in Paul's case, it does not add up. He did not pretend to be the Christ – he had no desire to be the Christ – he only wanted others to find and know and follow the Christ. The only time Paul ever pointed to himself was when he was hoping others would turn their own lives over to Jesus as much as he had himself. And the big kicker is: How come Paul had so many friends, both male and female? How was he able to start churches across half the known world – I mean, without even a bicycle or a typewriter, never mind a computer, or advertising on national television? Nobody worshipped Paul. We have some fundamentalists today who do, but nobody did back then. They loved him because through him they found the Christ. They loved him because they had found their own relationship to God in Christ Jesus, and he had been the catalyst. They were grateful, but they were not “dependent” on Paul, as we use that term. They would not see him for years on end. They would go on about their lives, trying to live in Christ Jesus, following their own WAY IN HIM. Whatever happened to Paul was not going to change that – not anymore.

Yet Paul's caring and love were deeply returned. How can we explain that? Jeremiah had one friend in all his forty years of ministry. Can you name any of Paul's personal friends? Timothy, Titus, Luke, Barnabas, Tychicus, Silas, Phoebe, Lydia, Onesimus, Philemon, Prisca, Aquila ... we could be here for a while. Track Paul during the end of his third missionary journey. From Corinth to Ephesus to Jerusalem, and every port and town in between, the Christian communities turned out to welcome Paul. It is obvious that they loved him. They wept at the thought that they might not see him again. They wept even more for the danger they thought he was heading into at Jerusalem – fears soon to be totally confirmed. Paul carried no stick of fear or coercion. He gave that up when he was converted. Lots of people disliked Paul, and you can too. You just need to know that the reasons usually given are all false.

Sorry to be so long at my point. Paul had a wonderful life – a life full of adventure, love, friends, purpose, enthusiasm, joy. We can look at that dimension of his life, and it is genuine and true and authentic. Yet superimposed on that picture, almost as if we were playing with transparencies on some classroom overhead projector, we can see another dimension

to Paul's life. Paul lived one of the harshest, toughest lives imaginable: Beaten, stoned, flogged; thrown into prison over and over; cold, hungry, sick, half-blind; no time for a wife or family of his own; estranged, at least for a while, from most of his dearest friends and relatives; considered a traitor by most of the nation he loved. Paul was also hated with fury by people from one end of the empire to the other. His mere presence at the temple in Jerusalem caused the worst peace-time riot the city had ever seen. More than forty God-fearing, law-abiding, deeply religious men swore they would not eat or drink anything ever again until they had murdered Paul in cold blood without trial or any due process of the Law they held sacred above all other things on earth. Some people did not like him.

You realize we could make the exact same point if we talked about Jesus' life, or Peter's. The question is: Will they be able to make the same point when they talk about *our* lives?

Did Paul live a wonderful life, or a terrible life? He lived both, of course. It just depends on which kind of truth you are looking through. In our kind of world, if we want the undiluted joy of living in Christ Jesus, we have to be ready for that other transparency to be the way a lot of people see us. Let me try that again: If we live in a world where a great many people are following Fool's Truth, then anybody trying to live for God's Truth will seem like an idiot, or irrelevant, or, more likely, evil.

It was, of course, Paul who first used the cryptic phrase, "*We are fools for Christ's sake.*" (I Corinthians 4:10) Today you have to be careful about the inflection, but the point remains: If you live for God's Truth in this world, you will be Truth's Fool in the eyes of most of the world, at least during your own lifetime.

Christian communities of every persuasion have always been aware of this "in but not of the world" duality. I cannot understand how we suddenly have a generation of liberal Christians who seem to be vague, at best, about such realities. I'm not referring to any of you, but it comes, I suspect, from having a generation or two of churchgoers who thought they were so bright and wonderful that they could be Christians and go out and save the world without having to bother with sound theology, prayer, studying the Bible, learning from the saints, or even having much faith in Jesus ... as long as they cared about "loving thy neighbor" (preferably at a safe distance), and had good intentions. How Satan must have licked his chops!

TRUTH'S FOOL

Not preaching or teaching now, just commenting: Have you ever wondered about some of Jesus' "unpopular" remarks? "*Do not set your pearls before swine, nor give dogs what is holy... Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.*" Many, many times, Jesus warns His followers that they must be careful outside the fellowship of His followers. Remember the movie *Witness*? "You be careful out there among them English." The old man had nothing but suspicion and mistrust of John Book when he was first brought onto the farm, wounded. But at the end he loved him. "I want you to know I think of you as one of us," he was saying. "You don't belong out there anymore, with people who think it's okay to hurt each other. If it gets too hard, you know where home is." Meanwhile, "You be careful out there among them English."

Do you ever get off the big story and just watch Jesus wending His way between situations and people? Keeping His peace sometimes; telling this person one thing, that person another, bidding His time; moving in with power to help here and there, but never in general, never automatically, never by outside demand or expectation. It is for all the world as if He tracks a truth that most of the world neither sees nor believes. And indeed He is Truth's Fool. He will go to any lengths to track and be true to this truth – what we have come to realize was His link, in prayer, to God. Yes, He would go to any lengths whatsoever. Much of the time – most of the time – even His friends couldn't figure out what He was doing, or why He was doing it that way. They only caught on, over time, because He never stopped doing it that way. And only after the Resurrection did it become clear, to those who found His truth, that in fact He was not a fool. That is, not only was He a nice guy with some fun ideas and a lot of caring, He also knew what He was doing – like nobody the world had ever seen before. "*He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.*" (Colossians 1:13)

So I just wanted to mention that I want you to stop going after Fool's Truth. I want you to go after God's Truth, and to live for the Christ who reveals it. Only, it is imperative for you to know that if you do that in this world, you will end up becoming Truth's Fool.

A TRUE AND PRESENT PARADISE

No matter what the calendar says, there is no help for it: This is an Easter Sermon. We cannot really talk about the True Paradise without Easter themes floating all around it and bearing it up. On the other hand, *every* Sunday is Easter Sunday! That is why Christians worship on Sunday. We broke from the Ten Commandments – broke from worshipping on the Sabbath – partly to prove that we really did trust Jesus’ authority, but also because we knew we could not live the New Life in Christ Jesus if we were not constantly reminded of the power that carries it, and the power by which He proved it. Even during the most solemn season of the Christian Year – the forty days of Lent, when we remember all the harsh circumstances that led to the Cross – we are supposed to come up for air each Sunday. Sunday is the Lord’s Day – Sunday is for celebrating the Resurrection – so we never count Sundays when we count the forty days of Lent. You cannot be sad on Sunday – it is forbidden. He lives! He lives! It’s Easter!

Let’s talk for a minute about the concept of Paradise. Jesus said to one of the thieves being crucified beside Him: “*Today you will be with me in paradise.*” (Luke 23:43) What does that mean to you? Well, to a lot of us that means: “If that thief made it, maybe there’s a chance for me too.” But I am asking you about the other end of the question. What fate was Jesus declaring to the thief beside Him? Was he going to God’s version of Disneyland? Was he going to a place where all the women are beautiful and willing, and the wine makes you high but never drunk? If it had been a thiefess next to Jesus, what would that Paradise look like? All the men are rich and generous and courteous, love to listen to you talk, and genuinely agree with everything you say?

Sprinkled with streets of gold, lots of harp playing, and undefined longings that get instantly and totally gratified, Paradise is a vague concept at best, and often rather silly. Humans rarely *want* what is good for them. We rarely *know* what is good for us. It is much easier to tempt us toward a Fool’s Paradise if we neither know nor want what is genuinely good, or valuable, or satisfying, or true.

The Adventures of Pinocchio, the great Christian Primer of the nineteenth century, pictures our confusion with exquisite irony. The boys are invited to come away from school and all unpleasant duties, disciplines, and responsibilities. They are taken to Pleasure Island (their

notion of Paradise), where everybody gets to do exactly what he wants, at all times, until they all make asses of themselves. Pinocchio, on the very brink of assification, finally manages – by deeds of great courage and sacrificial love – to reverse the process and finally turn into a real person. The story is not very subtle. True Paradise is home, and school, and self-discipline, and responsibility, and becoming more and more a true person (a mensch). What Pinocchio started out thinking was Paradise, was really Hell. The story is not very subtle, yet clearly much of our society has never read or “heard” it.

What Jesus really said to the thief was: “I can tell from what you just said that your soul has come alive. So you are coming with me to a place where you can grow into your true being and destiny.”

Some technicalities for those who are interested: Paradise (*paradesios*) literally means a walled-off garden. All our great words start from humble, earthy beginnings. There is no spiritual language, so we use earthbound concepts and try to make them point toward what we mean. A message-bearer, the postman, becomes “angel.” “About face” becomes repentance. Missing the target becomes “sin.” Someone paying the debt you owe becomes “redemption.” The Garden of Eden, of course, is the earliest “garden paradise” of our tradition. The concept has moved from there to mean “Heaven, the abode of righteous souls after death.” That is from the dictionary – not always the best theological source. Some of you may come from a tradition that sees Paradise as an intermediate resting place for souls awaiting the Day of Resurrection. Not to be confused with Purgatory, a holding area for souls that have made it but have to wait around until Heaven is officially opened. We do get tangled up in our own constructs ...

There are two non-matching traditions in Christendom. One says we are each processed individually at the time of our death (like the thief on the cross). The other says that Heaven cannot begin until the full story is finished here, and then, on the Day of Resurrection, we all get processed at the same time (the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory). This second construct is tied up with an early picture of a tiny cosmos in which the only room for Heaven is right here, on a reconstructed earth. The dead have to wait until the current phase of earth history is played out because the earth is already occupied – there is no place else to put Heaven, at least not the Heaven for humans. You would do well to abandon this second view – just as many of you have finally concluded

that the earth is *not* flat, that space is *not* made of water, and that Creation did *not* take place six to ten thousand years ago. God is always bigger than our minds can grasp, and so are God's purposes and plans for us.

So the Bible is full of images which reveal the limitations of human thinking and information at any given time. You do not get extra points for believing what is now clearly absurd. That does not further faith; it freezes it in a bygone age, and condemns the church to being a museum piece, instead of a living fellowship of Jesus' followers. "*You shall worship the Lord your God with all of your mind.*" If there were no new thoughts for you to think, no new ways of understanding, no new efforts to walk the Life in Christ Jesus, then God would have shut this place down already, don't you think? Please feel Jesus inviting you to bring all of your faith, all of your love, and all of your devotion right on into the current century. More than half of Christendom is still stuck somewhere back in the 1400s. Another ten percent has gone off into woo-woo land – a future that will never exist, a hodgepodge of theological wishful thinking without grounding in tradition or revelation. Both ends of the spectrum have comfort and caring for some people, and both have elements of truth of course. But Jesus needs people in each new generation who will be more faithful, more responsive, more obedient to the Holy Spirit – the *Living Christ* – than either of those approaches will allow.

"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." (Colossians 3:1-5)

We all make up our minds, inadequate as they seem to us. There really is a New Kingdom, or this world is all there is. We really do want to get NEW ourselves, or we are stuck in a wooden-puppet land with no higher goal than Pleasure Island. Most important of all, at least to me, is the realization that the people of the true church live their lives for this New Kingdom from the time of their conversions onward. They do not sit around waiting for some vague and distant Heaven. They do *not* – as so many church folk do today – separate the life they live in the present from the life they intend to believe in and hope for in some future. Please do not misunderstand me: They clearly believe in the future, by whatever

images they have. They trust God for the future and know it will be wonderful, and far greater than this broken, alienated realm we live in now. But they live for the New Kingdom **HERE AND NOW**, and nothing else matters in comparison. Therefore, they *experience* Paradise now, as well as live toward it. They know the love of Christ in the present, not just as a future promise. They are excited about the values of the Kingdom they find all around them, and they do not cop out with excuses about how hard it is here by saying they cannot be faithful until later.

You are *already* living your eternal life! The Kingdom is *both* here and coming. We live “IN but not OF the world.” The time to be faithful, and stay true, and honor Christ’s love is NOW. “*The Kingdom of God is in the midst of you.*” (Luke 17:21)

Isn’t that interesting: A Fool’s Paradise is *always* in the future. The True Paradise is with us the moment we awaken and begin to live for it. A Fool’s Paradise focuses on things so pitiful, paltry, and petty that it is impossible to deliver on the promises. Perhaps a better way to say the same thing: The promises of a Fool’s Paradise, if delivered, are so far from what we really wanted that they turn to ashes in our hands. But the True Paradise delivers constantly, and continually surprises us with blessings and benefits far beyond anything we had imagined.

Remember last week’s sermon? Did the Apostle Paul live a hard life, or a good life? He lived an extremely hard life. However, he was one of the happiest men who ever lived. His life was full of adventure, friends, love, purpose, accomplishment – full, most of all, of the challenge and joy of Christ’s presence with him. Hell was all around him, and he knew it and felt it. But he lived in and for Paradise, and his life was shaped by it and for it as he went. And always in the background you can hear his theme playing: “He lives! He lives! It’s Easter!”

Over and over, I feel and experience Paradise in the life and efforts of this church. Oh, not every day in every way. Where do you think we are?! And sometimes, of course, it is all around me but I miss it. Or it is here and I ruin it. But over and over, I feel the rejoicing as I feel Paradise already at work: a Deacons’ meeting; a prayer vigil; groups of all kinds and ages meeting to learn and share; caring, love, support, concern being acted out, and acted upon; individuals making new decisions, moving toward deeper life in Christ. It is really quite overwhelming, once your soul gets tuned to it.

But I have made my point, insofar as I am able, and I am tired of being serious. You have been very receptive to this series, and I am grateful. Let me close the series with a simple little story from out of the past, and maybe it won't even change the subject very much.

* * *

The old man had been a devoted churchman all his life, but he came from the Southern Baptist tradition. Somewhere along the line, his wife had died, and rumor had it that his children had grown ashamed of him, now that he had fallen on hard times. He had wandered out of Texas and somehow ended up in East Whittier, back in the '40s. He worked as a custodian – they called them janitors in those days. The old man had barely enough to pay the rent, buy his food, and keep body and soul together, though many would have been surprised to learn that he tithed to the church, giving more than some folks with three and four times his income. For him it was just part of his way of life. In East Whittier in the '40s, there were no Southern Baptist churches, so the old man went to the Friends Church (outsiders called them Quakers).

Well, the old man had been more than a casual student of the Bible for a lot of years, and when the preacher got onto some of the great themes, you could almost see it working through his soul and up into his face, and pretty soon he would start muttering, "Amen ... Yes, Lord, that's right ..." and other such pleasantries. And if the preacher didn't let up or get off track, the old man would get louder and more enthusiastic as he felt the Message warm his soul.

Well, the poor Quakers weren't used to such overt displays of noise or emotion, though they had once been famous for such expression themselves – as you would know if you thought for thirty seconds about their nickname. Anyway, the weeks passed, and more and more folk became alarmed, though some were content to let the old man worship however he pleased. Finally, the Elders met to discuss the emergency. They were mostly afraid that the outbursts were distracting others from worship, and they worried that the visitors would be put off and never come again. So they went to visit the old man and explain their dilemma. They told him how Quakers were extremely sedate and fond of silence, and that they meant no disrespect to his faith, but could he possibly keep silent during the worship services. The old man was extremely sorry, and quite embarrassed. He promised he would try to not be disruptive in the future.

Everything went fine for a few weeks, and people started to relax ... until the preacher got to preaching one Sunday from the eighth chapter of Romans: *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.”* Well, mortal flesh can only withstand so much, and as the preacher waxed eloquent, the old man was transformed, and soon the air was filled with “Hallelujahs” and “Praises to God” and “Amens.” The preacher didn’t seem to mind and made no effort to slack off, so it went on for quite some time.

Several days later, the Elders went to visit the old man again. They told him they valued his presence, wanted his membership, and understood that he didn’t mean to be causing a disturbance – that he was only carried away with what in many churches would be considered a very appropriate response. But, they said, this just wasn’t right in a Quaker church. What they had decided, they told the old man, was that he needed some greater incentive to keep quiet. They knew, from conversations around the parish, that the old man was perpetually cold. And as winter was coming on, it was always a trial for him to sleep at night, for he could neither pay the extra expense to light his gas furnace nor pay to purchase more blankets. The Elders said they wanted to make a deal with him. If he would promise to be silent in church, they would take up a collection and buy him *five* warm and wonderful top-grade wool blankets. He in turn agreed that if he caused a disturbance again, he would return the blankets.

It worked wonderfully well, and everybody was happy. From time to time, you could see the old man twitch or squirm a bit when the sermon got really good. But things remained peaceful, and the problem seemed solved at last. Everything was wonderful through October, November, December, January. The old man slept warm, and the congregation prayed in peace and quiet.

Then one Sunday in late January, the preacher started preaching from Second Corinthians, chapter five: *“For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation;*

*the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; **that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting our trespasses against us, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.***” (II Corinthians 5:14-19)

Well, it was the old man’s favorite passage. As the preacher discussed verse after verse, the Elders could see that the old man was in trouble. He was squirming in his seat, his face was transfixed, his knuckles were white with the effort to hold it in. And when the preacher started lining out that final verse – “*God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting our trespasses against us, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation*” – well, the old man finally lost it. He rose out of his pew as if a legion of angels were bearing him up, and from his mouth came a cry of pure, ecstatic praise and joy: “Blankets or no blankets – HALLELUJAH!”

No one ever got an accurate count, nor did anyone care, but the angels reached many others there that morning – including, they say, most of the Elders. And the congregation echoed in reply, “HALLELUJAH!”

Did that old man live in a Fool’s Paradise? Do I wish for all of you the simple, profound, enduring love and praise that old man felt for his Savior? With or without the noise, indeed I do. Blankets or no blankets ...