

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.