

“Foolish, Slow, or Both?”

Jesus said to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, ***“Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe . . .”*** I think we ought to study those words carefully, because I know in my own life they are very apt descriptions of me. Maybe you, too?

First we need to ask why Jesus said this.

One answer: Because they two were foolish and slow. But at that they are no better or worse than any of the other disciples, and Jesus never refers to them in such words. So what prompted this reaction from Jesus at this point? If we look at what the two had said just before, we may get a clue. ***“Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.”***

If you recall, in Luke’s Gospel the women reported to the disciples in the upper room what they had been told by the angels at the tomb to report. Luke then tells us: ***“But these words seemed to [the disciples] an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”*** If we assume that the two on the Emmaus Road were in that body of disbelieving disciples, Jesus might well have chided them at that point. In part because that phrase “idle tale” is very demeaning. It implies that these women were just nattering ninnies, not worth listening to. Such dismissiveness would have been something Jesus would address.

But maybe we need to go back a bit further in the narrative to ascertain what prompted Jesus’ use of ***“foolish and slow of heart.”*** Was it that they had not recognized Him on the road? Much scholarly opinion has been floated about as to why they did not recognize Him. When we look at all the resurrection narratives, we see that the resurrected body of Jesus was different. He could pass through locked doors. At the end of this narrative He simply disappears. He repeatedly shows His hands and feet, still bearing the marks of the nails and spear, which apparently is what clinches the ability to recognize.

All that suggests that His facial aspect was not what they had remembered it to be. Did He glow? Was He now clean-shaven? Had He become a blond? We don't know.

Cleopas and his companion were not part of the inner circle of The Twelve (now after the death of Judas, The Eleven), so we have no idea how long they were with Jesus. They could have been part of the unnumbered and unnamed cohort that accompanied Jesus from Galilee at the start of His ministry. They could have been pilgrims who first encountered Jesus on Palm Sunday and got caught up in the revelry of that moment.

Had they been the latter, we might understand how their enthusiasm had been laid low by the subsequent events that they refer to as, *“the things that have taken place . . . in these days?”* Had they been long-term followers, then Jesus could well have been disappointed that they had not, over three years, caught onto His mission (but, as will see from Luke's narrative, neither had the Eleven).

That is, I think, the jumping-off point for Jesus telling these men they are foolish and slow. First, let's examine those words.

Anoetoi (“foolish,” actually “foolish ones”) comes from the same root as the Greek word for “mind.” With a “a-“ prefix, that becomes a negative — without. “Without mind” or “unintelligent” — or perhaps better here “unthinking” That's an attribute that any one of us can wear as a label all too often — unthinking.

How often have you done something really dumb — dropped the Thanksgiving turkey onto the floor, poked yourself with a sharp object, gone into a room and forgotten why you went in there? All such episodes are evidence of unthinking (okay, that last one may have more to do with “senior moments,” but it used to happen in your younger years, too). Not paying attention, not being diligent, or worse, telling yourself (or saying to others around you) *“I knew I would do that!”* — that we can label “foolish.”

bradein (“slow”) has at its root the concept of hesitation. “Hesitant to believe” may also describe us on more than one occasion (more on that). But the Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich Lexicon insists that, in the context of Luke 24, it means “dull” — as in “dull as a box of hair” Jesus is not pulling any punches here.

So, what is it about their reaction to “*the things that have taken place . . . in these days?*” that qualifies them for these evaluations? That is displayed in their own words: “. . . *we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.*” Actually, that translation fails to capture the nuance of the Greek.

[A quick Greek lesson: Greek makes great use of the imperfect mood (English has such a mood, we just don’t use it very often, or at least don’t label it as such). The imperfect is used to express an action or behavior that goes on over a long period of time (the perfect, in Greek known as the aorist, is used to describe something that happens at a moment in time.)]

We have in this sentence from the Emmaus disciples an imperfect, which means that had been hoping for some time. How long? As I said, we don’t know if they were Galileans or Palm Sunday followers — all we can say with certainty is that their hopes were dashed.

What makes that foolish, slow, hesitant, dumb, dull, and unthinking is that they had not been paying attention to Jesus for whatever time they had spent with Him and had laid their own agenda over His. They hadn’t built their hopes on what they heard, saw and learned in Jesus; they brought to their experience of Jesus what they hoped to get out of it.

Have you done that? I’ll bet you have.

How often has that concept of “*we had been hoping . . .*” cropped up in your life? “*We had been hoping that the PET Scan would show that the cancer had been eradicated.*” “*We had been hoping that our child would get into that better college.*” “*We had been hoping that she would get off that drug in rehab.*” “*We had been hoping that the promotion would*

have come by now.” “We had been hoping . . . hoping . . . hoping.”

As one commentator expressed it: *“We like to hear future tenses. We like it when families say that everything will be okay, that they will go on, that they will get everything back to normal. We like future tenses so much that we reward people in deep grief for reassuring us that the sun will rise tomorrow and that life will go on.”*

“We had been hoping” is not an expression of a rosy future; it is the announcement of defeat and dismay, because, in essence, it says, *“Those hopes cannot and will not be realized.”*

What makes that foolish and slow is that the very object of their hope was right there with them, and they failed to recognize Him. Failed, that is, until He did something that changed the whole situation. ***“ . . . beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.”*** It didn’t come in a flash (remember, they are “slow to believe”), but it did come.

What Jesus did is called “positioning” — He did not make them change their minds or hearts, He positioned them for change, to be changed. Which is precisely what God’s Word and His Sacraments are designed to do. They do not change us; they position us so that the Holy Spirit can work change in us. When we engage the Word, when we share in the Eucharist, when we remember our baptisms — we are being set up for the work of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus took the two Emmaus disciples and opened them up to recognize what had been said about Him in the scriptures. He didn’t argue with them; He gave them story. Our spiritual lives are transformed by story, which is why we are encouraged to read the Bible. But not to read it as a textbook; read it as story.

In story you enter into the narrative; you become one with it; you see yourself as one of the characters (Caution! Your sinful self is always pushing to be the “hero” or central character; tone it down a bit.)

Read the Parable of the Good Samaritan and imagine yourself as the man who fell among thieves. Revisit Jesus' account of the Pharisee and the Publican; enter into the story as the Pharisee. Rummage through the Old Testament, and find account after account of God acting into human history and place yourself in those stories. You will be amazed at how that can transform you.

When you go to prayer, hold off on the intercessions (they're important, and you will get to them in a moment!); just relate to God your story: What happened that day that was enjoyable? Where did you experience God most clearly? At what point did you find it difficult to recognize that God was present? It is in the telling of our story that we begin to make sense of our lives.

When you come forward to the Lord's Table, see yourself seated with Jesus Himself and imagine what you might want to say to Him.

And Monday morning, as you take your shower or bath, really allow yourself to feel the cleansing power of each drop of water and stand under the flow or settle into the warm waters and begin to imagine what Baptism is still doing into every fiber of your being.

Now, I know that some of you, maybe many of you, are going to resist doing this. You may be thinking right now, "*I would never do that; that's too 'out there.'*" Two words come to mind: anoetoi and bradein — we all need to get past them.

Our spiritual lives are all too often matters of rote; or nonexistent activity; or mindless gestures; or quick fixes to what we perceive as our problems. We become hesitant to try on new ways, new approaches, new ideas. You do know what this defines: "*repeating the same behaviors over and over expecting different outcomes*"? That defines insanity. Or in this case foolishness.

Recognize what happened to these two Emmaus disciples after their engagement with Jesus.

First, they realized something had stirred in them: ***“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”*** Yet, even before that, something was going on, when they invited Jesus to stay with them — the Holy Spirit was already at work on them. And at the end, these despairing, downcast “we had hoped” disciples were running back to Jerusalem to tell their story — that’s right, their story: ***“. . . they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”***

One last thing to “try on”— the next time you get together with fellow-members — at a meeting, a study group, a social event, here in worship — don’t talk about the weather, or that day’s news stories, or how you favorite team is doing; talk about your story: Where has God been active in your life? What has God been equipping you to do? How has God been transforming your thinking? When have you been feeling the stirring of the Holy Spirit? Where have you been meeting Jesus?

If you have none of those things to talk about, maybe you are just being foolish, or slow, or both. Jesus beckons you to be neither — the resurrected Christ right here, right now, wants to open you and set your heart on fire.

Take a good look within: can you feel the flame?

Amen.