

In Which We Think a Little too Hard

Micah 6: 6-8; Luke 10: 25-37

January 11, 2015

Rev. Dr. Charles Parker

I. Introduction

There's a story that A.A. Milne wrote that's called *In Which Piglet Does a Very Grand Thing*, and Pooh and Piglet in the story are talking to each other. "Rabbit's clever," Pooh said thoughtfully. "Yes," said Piglet, "Rabbit is clever." "And he has a brain." "Yes," said Piglet, "Rabbit has a brain." There was a long silence. "I suppose," said Pooh, "that that's why he never understands anything."

Every January here at Metropolitan, we do a sermon series that we aim at folks that are not regular churchgoers, folks that are on a spiritual quest, but maybe haven't found a church home where they feel comfortable pursuing that. And so, we aim a sermon series that is a little bit less churchy and a little bit more popular culture-ish, and the intention is to create space that people who are not regular churchgoers might find welcoming. So, this is a great month, if you have friends that don't have a church home, to invite them. Because all month we're going to be talking about Winnie the Pooh.

One of the oft-stated characteristics of Winnie the Pooh is that he is a bear of very little brain, but he's surrounded by folks, two friends of his in particular, who are very smart. He's got Rabbit, who is known for being clever, and then there's Owl who is known for being learned. But as the stories unfold, it's generally true that neither Rabbit nor Owl are quite as clever or learned as they think they are and that Pooh is also often the place where the wisdom of the story resides.

II. A.A. Milne was not an anti-intellectual

Now, this is not because A.A. Milne was anti-intellectual in any way. He was a very educated man. He was a mathematician who took a degree at Cambridge University and surrounded himself with a lot of very smart folks, but he also brings a very sharp eye to the deep ironies of life in upper class England. And it's that ironic eye that delights us as adults when we encounter those stories and where much of Pooh's wisdom is to be found.

Pooh has a wonderful ability to poke fun at the pretentiousness of our intellectual life. To highlight how our education often leads us to a place where we sometimes over-think problems a little bit, and also the ways in which our over-intellectualizing can cut us off from the empathy that is at the root of most good decision-making.

III. Complexity vs. simplicity

Now it may be helpful to note that there is an inherent tendency for human systems to become more and more complex as they move through time. Laws become more and more detailed. Bureaucracies become more and more elaborate. Committees end up getting broken into subcommittees and new committees created for new situations. And this was true also in Jesus' day where the religious leaders got focused on more and more of the minutiae of their religious life and spent endless time arguing about how far one could actually walk on the Sabbath before it became work or what constituted a ritually pure sacrifice.

And Jesus, like many of the great prophets before him and like this wonderful passage from Micah that we heard in our Hebrew scripture lesson today, reminds us and the religious teachers that God is less worried about the details of an appropriate sacrifice and more concerned with how we go about living a life that reflects justice and kindness and humility. As you look at Jesus' teaching, whenever he's in conversation with the religious leaders of the day, he's always pushing them to simplify and get to the essence and not allow the minutiae, the over-thinking, the complexity to mask God's real call.

In our beautiful and familiar passage of the Good Samaritan today, we've got the story of a lawyer who's trying to trip Jesus up on the complexities of Jewish law, and Jesus does what he always does. He pushes the lawyer to come back to the essence, love God with all that you have, love your neighbor as yourself. And then, the lawyer keeps trying to make it more complex, "Well, who is my neighbor? Let's analyze that. Let's talk about the theology of being a neighbor."

What Jesus does is constantly call his religious community and us to a process of simplifying, because while we tend to create complexity, there is a very deep part of us that yearns for simplicity, for making things simple, for making them doable and attainable.

Albert Einstein, who was not a shallow thinker, said, "If you can't explain a scientific principle simply, you don't understand it well enough yourself." There's something about understanding something deeply that allows one to communicate simply. We all yearn for that.

I mean, look at my iPad. I love my iPad. Why? It's got one button. That's it. The design is incredibly simple, meant to be incredibly intuitive, and this is why Apple is as widely successful as they are. Steve Jobs said that simple is harder to do than complex in terms of design. "You have to work harder," he says, "to get your thinking clean, to make it simple." "But it's worth it in the end because once you get there," he says, "you can move mountains."

Somebody else said something about moving mountains. It'll come to me in just a minute (!)

Google. Why do we love Google? It's a big empty page with one line. There's no directions. There's no commentary. You type in your question and that's it. It's clean. It's simple. And there's something in us that responds to that on a very deep level.

Dr. John Maeda, who's the recent President of the Rhode Island School of Design, in his book, *The Laws of Simplicity*, writes, "The simplest way to achieve simplicity is through thoughtful reduction." So, Jesus' question that gets echoed by Pooh is, where are the places in our lives that we can engage in some thoughtful reduction? Where can we pare back what's happening and cluttering our lives? What physically are the things in your life that make it complex and clutter-filled? That's a great question after Christmas, right? Because our houses that were already stuffed with stuff that we didn't need are now more stuffed with more stuff that we don't need. How do we pare that back a little bit and reduce the complexity and the clutter?

One of the things that I personally am lousy at is picking up new jobs and I have discovered that as I make my life overly complex, nothing gets done as effectively. Where are the places in our lives that we can cut back on some of the stuff that we do so that what we decide to do, what remains, we can do powerfully and effectively and with authenticity? Instead of cluttering everything with a mass of jobs, all of which will get half done, how do we pare back to do the things we choose to do with power and grace, with kindness and humility?

How can our church pare back a little bit? Because our church, like any complex system, gets more and more complex, we get more and more ministries that develop, more and more committees that get formed -- amen -- how do we get a little bit better focused? How do we pare back on all of the massive activity to do the things that we do best and that God is calling us to do?

We're going to be having a Church Council retreat next month where that will be one of our major questions -- how do we not just set goals that are more and more and more goals but how do we focus on the things that we do the best and where God is calling us to use our gifts?

IV. Avoidance vs. Engagement

Our Gospel lesson today also points out that often for us, over thinking is an avoidance technique. It's a way of when we get caught up in trying to find complex answers to questions, one of the things we're doing is avoiding doing anything. Because we can spend all of our time analyzing a complex question. And we see this, of course, all the time in our life here at church, in our lives at home and at work, when we start to hear a call on our life, often the first response of the system is to say, "You know what, we should study that. We should get more data on that." Or if you're Methodist, "Let's form a taskforce so that we can study that," or, "That's a great idea. I don't think we can fit it into this year's budget but maybe we can put a line item in next

year's budget to deal with that." Because if we can postpone, if we can drag our feet just long enough, maybe God's call will go elsewhere, right?

And this is what happens in Jesus' dialogue with the lawyer. The lawyer says, "What do I do to inherit eternal life?" "Well, you know what to do. What's the answer? Love God with everything you have. Love your neighbor." That's pretty straightforward. But the lawyer wants to make it a policy question, right? "Well, who is my neighbor? Let's talk about that a little bit. Let's reflect on the definition of being a neighbor. Let's intellectualize and make it about a policy statement." Because what happens when we treat things from a policy standpoint? We never have to do anything. And what does Jesus say over and over again? "Do this and you will live." "Well, who is my neighbor?" You tell the story -- go and do likewise. We can intellectualize any question to death because it's a great way to avoid engagement. And what Jesus says is, "You know what, you know the answer. Go do it."

V. Detachment vs empathy

The Gospel lesson also highlights the fact that over-intellectualizing is often for us an opportunity to avoid engaging emotionally in a situation. It is infinitely easier to talk about policies around homelessness than to engage somebody who happens to be homeless, right? It's easy to get caught up in all kinds of complex questions around healthcare or hunger and food production instead of figuring out how to feed people and get people healthcare.

The lawyer wants to have a policy conversation about what it means to be a neighbor. And what does Jesus do? He tells a story, "There was a man going from Jerusalem to Jericho and he fell among thieves." What has Jesus done there? He has stopped the question from being about policy and he has invited the lawyer into a place where he can empathize with the person in need. He has told a story -- we talked about that last week -- and invited the lawyer to be a part of a story, because when the lawyer starts to live into that story, it stops being about policy and it starts being about where I encounter another person who is in need.

Jesus is not teaching the lawyer anything the lawyer doesn't know. Jesus is trying to help the lawyer become a different kind of person.

Albert Einstein said that most people think that it is the intellect that makes a great scientist. They are wrong. It is character. It's not about what we know. It's about who we are. And Jesus is helping this attorney get it out of his head and change who he is.

VI. Conclusion

The story in which Piglet does a very grand thing involves Owl's house being knocked down in a storm. For those of you who are more familiar with the Walt Disney's movies, this is *Winnie the Pooh and The Blustery Day*. Do you all remember

that? So, Owl's house gets knocked over and Eeyore starts out looking for where a new house for Owl might be found and he finds a great house for Owl. In fact, it's already furnished with all the things Owl might want to live in. And it's furnished because it's Piglet's house, right? But Eeyore doesn't know that. So, Eeyore, with great pride, gathers all of the animals around this house that he has found and he said, "Here is Owl's new home." And there's this sort of awkward silence. And Christopher Robin says, "Well, it's a very nice house and if your own house is blown down, you must go somewhere else, mustn't you, Piglet? What would you do Piglet if your house was blown down?" Before Piglet could think, Pooh answered for him, "He'd come and live with me," said Pooh, "wouldn't you, Piglet?" Piglet squeezed his paw, "Thank you, Pooh. I should love to."

Doing the right thing does not typically involve as much intellectual fire power as we like to bring to it. It means loving God with everything we have and it means extending ourselves to the people around us who need it. It's just that simple and it always will be.

Amen.