

“What Do You Think?”

Lamentations 3:19-25; Romans 12:16-21;  
1 Cor 8:1-3; Matt 18:12-14; Luke 10:25-37

March 1, 2015

Pastor Norman Fowler  
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

In the season of Lent we begin to think about the struggles of our lives. Last week we talked about how easily our relationships can get broken and the need for reconciliation. We talked about how our relationship with God can get broken and that Christ came to reconcile us to God. As we think about the struggles of our lives and the ways things can be broken, sometimes it's the very fact of the struggle itself that begins to be an issue. It's interesting to hear the author of Lamentation say that when he thinks about the difficulty of his situation it is all wormwood and gall, as he describes it. It's like an overwhelming depression that comes over him. But then he says, “But then I remember who you are, and that you are faithful and good.” There is a brightness that enters into the midst of that darkness. It is in part a question of where I direct what I'm thinking about. So this morning we will talk about where we direct our thinking. What are we thinking about?

The interesting thing is that sometimes, in thinking about things, I come to conclusions. When I get to that conclusion, then I think I know something. When I begin to know something, I act on that knowledge. There's a certain struggle I have with this idea of thinking I know something. Sometimes other people have that same struggle with me, as well. It is a struggle we have with one another when each of us thinks we know something but that knowledge doesn't quite match up.

One of the people who struggled with this is a man named Francis Schaeffer. He had been a pastor. He had been a man who was in the leadership of his denomination, in the leadership of a whole movement. In the midst of that, there came a point when he had to take a step away because he noticed that power had become something that had overtaken their actions. He couldn't see a consistency between the way they were moving forward—particularly the infighting that was beginning to happen between the people in leadership—and his knowledge, his expectation of what it meant to be a Christian. So he took a step back. He decided he needed to go all the way back to agnosticism and start again.

It is out of that experience that he came to recognize that all of his knowledge, without a certain amount of compassion and hospitality, wasn't working. Francis Schaeffer was the one who founded L'Abri, a community of Christians in Switzerland. One of the things L'Abri is known for is its hospitality, its willingness to take in anyone who is willing to talk together and to think about what it means to have a God who gives us his Son, gives us the grace of God in Christ.

It is interesting that when we begin to think we know something, there are times when that can get in the way of who we might be. It's the same thing that Paul notes in Corinthians. They are struggling over whether it is all right to eat meat given to idols, and he knows it's all right because, after all, idols are nothing. And yet, it is causing

struggles within the community. What he says is, “If my knowledge puffs me up, it’s not helpful.” I think that’s what Francis Schaeffer was beginning to see in his struggle.

The very next phrase is what Paul suggests is the antidote, really: love builds up. Francis Schaeffer is great at recognizing how the thought in our world gets puffed up. Our secular knowledge begins to be something that feels like it knows everything and yet it can easily crumble.

The thing I would note is that it’s not just secular knowledge that can get in the way. It often feels to me that our theological knowledge can, too. Just because I have a degree, a Master of Divinity, does that make me more knowledgeable about God? In these days, we tend not to give quite as much authority to those kinds of things as we have in the past, and yet, it’s easy to say, “I’ve got all these plaques on my wall. I must be important!” And yet we realize it’s not the plaque that makes the difference. In fact, it feels like the plaque is something that just puffs us up. It’s trying to learn to love that is the real issue—to learn to accept both the love of God and to express it, to allow it to build us up. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, knowledge puffs us up, but love builds up.

Does that mean that all thinking is just going to puff us up? I don’t think so. I think we need to recognize that we are called to think, but to do so in the context of knowing we are God’s children. We do need to recognize, as Paul says in Romans, “It’s easy to think we are wiser than we are.” And when we think we are wiser than we are, what does he say? “So long as it’s up to me, may I bring peace.” It feels to me like when we think we are wiser than we are, what happens is not peace, and we need to work at that. But that’s not to say we shouldn’t think.

That’s one of the reasons I chose these other two passages of Jesus. How does he start the passage about the shepherd? He says, “What do you think?” He wants us to engage our thought process with what he’s saying. What do you think? How is the kingdom of God like the Good Shepherd? How am I like the Good Shepherd? What does it mean to say that God is like the Good Shepherd when one is lost out of the 99? It feels like he’s saying nobody is expendable; God loves every one and wants to embrace all who would come, to find us and release us from our lostness. Really, what Jesus is saying is to think about this. Maybe there’s a tendency to want to give answers, but it really is an invitation to think about it.

The same thing happens when he is asked a question by a lawyer. This lawyer comes along, and I don’t know exactly what his purpose is, but he may be thinking that Jesus is getting really popular. “Everybody is thinking good things about Jesus, so if I best him, I’ll be even better in everybody else’s eyes.” So he asks the question, “What will give me eternal life?” Jesus asks him a question back. “What does the law say?” The lawyer answers, “Love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. Jesus says, “You’re right! Go and do this and you’ll be fine.”

The lawyer doesn’t seem satisfied with that. He didn’t come to just have Jesus agree with him. He wants to show that he’s better. He wants to show some way that Jesus

doesn't quite measure up. So he asks, "Who is my neighbor?" It's one of those stories we have often heard before about the Good Samaritan. I won't go through the whole story again, but notice that the hero of the story is the Good Samaritan, which would have been an oxymoron in Jewish society. They were in a place where there were no good Samaritans; they were two different things. You notice at the end when Jesus asked who the neighbor was, the lawyer couldn't even say it was the Samaritan. He said, "The one who showed mercy." Jesus says, "Go and do likewise." He is saying to go and be like that Samaritan. That's the story, but notice what Jesus says at the end. "Who do you think was the neighbor?" He doesn't tell the lawyer; he invited him to think about it. Who was the neighbor in this story?

So it feels to me like Jesus, in many ways, through his whole ministry is saying, "What do you think? Who do you think I am?" He tells the story of the shepherd going to find a single lost sheep. He tells a story of a father who has two sons, one of whom takes off and is profligate. And yet, he runs to welcome the son home, showing the love of the father for the son who returned. Then he shows us the love of the father for the hard-hearted son who doesn't want to join in the celebration. He goes on to tell us about who might be our neighbor—the Good Samaritan. In doing so, he's not just asking us to think about a Samaritan back in Palestine. I feel that every time I read it, he's asking me who the Samaritan is in my life that I think can't be good. Who is my neighbor?

As we revisit these stories we, too, may hear Jesus ask, "What do you think?" What do *you* think? Amen.

Let's pray:

Lord, it's so easy to focus on the struggles we have and to forget that you are present, available. Lord, sometimes it's hard to see how you are present. Remind us again of your steadfast love. Help us notice again that you have sent your Son that we might know the fullness of that love. You invite us into community together around a table to hear your stories that help us think about who you are. Lord, let us think about who you are and wonder at who you are. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.