

A FEW LOOSE ENDS

I Corinthians 1:26-31

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

Reformation Sunday October 27, 2019

Lord William Thomson Kelvin was one of the exalted leaders of the Western scientific world during the latter years of the nineteenth century; one writer has referred to him as “the Carl Sagan of the Gay Nineties.” Lord Kelvin’s contributions to the realm of physics were substantial, particularly in thermodynamics and the science of navigation. He saw much discovered and accomplished in his lifetime, so much so that toward the end of the century he was moved to pontificate that “physics is now at last a *largely completed* science... all that is left is to gather up a few loose ends here and there.”

It was a promising comment for students of physics, but alas, it was just a tad premature...for over the next thirty years physicists went on to discover such things as x-rays, the theory of relativity, and the whole realm of quantum theory. So, within just a few decades all the classic dogmas of Lord Kelvin’s physics had been knocked into a cocked hat.

Writing some years later about this remarkable chain of events, Dr. Lewis Thomas said something important not only for physicists, but for anyone working in almost any field. He said, “We all need to pay more attention to our ignorance. A good education ought to include the news, among other things, that we don’t understand a flea, much less the making of a thought.” Thomas then went on to lay out a whole assortment of mysteries about which the scientific community didn’t have a clue, and he argued further that we ought to think of science as the endless pursuit of mystery.¹

Now, Thomas was addressing the scientific community, but he might as well have been talking to the church, for we, too, are called to the unending pursuit of mystery – in our case, the mystery of God’s redemptive love in human life – and yet, we find ourselves surrounded by the forces of reductionism which seek to destroy or deplete that mystery. I don’t need to tell you that there are churches all across this land filled with folks who believe they already know everything they need to know about the nature of God, about Jesus Christ, about the church, about human nature.

There is, among many people, a temptation to forget the central mystery around which we gather – the mystery of God’s ever-expansive love, which no human can never adequately define. We need reminders of our own limitations, of the danger of moral and spiritual pride which can result from thinking we have it all figured out.

In part, at least, such pride was at the heart of the divisions that racked the church in Corinth, to whom Paul wrote the words we read just a few moments ago. The Corinthian church had been beset by cliques and clashes, by all manner of factions, each claiming to have a superior way and understanding. Each faction claimed a different leader: Paul, Cephas, Apollos. Each faction was highly egocentric. Each thought it had discovered *the* way to be

¹ Dr. Lewis Thomas, *The Youngest Science*, New York, G.K. Hall, 1983.

Christian, that it had all the right answers, that its understanding tied the faith together tightly, with little room for loose ends.

To that fragmented congregation Paul wrote, seeking to counter that prevailing wisdom. He invited the Corinthians to consider the humble circumstances in which they had first been called: when they were brought into the community, he reminded them, not many of them were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, and few were nobly born. Yet now, amid their divisiveness, they each seemed to be claiming superiority. Paul reminded them that God had chosen to shame the wisdom of the world by means of the folly of the cross, and he called them again to lives of cross-centered discipleship. It was no anti-intellectual appeal; Paul told them that Christ had become their wisdom. Theirs was a wisdom of the cross... a wisdom of humility and vulnerability. And that *is* a mystery.

When we in our day think we have reached a point of superior understanding, when we believe that our limited perspectives reflect final truth, when we find ourselves willing and ready to judge who the real Christians are and to hell with the rest... then it is that we need this corrective word of Paul.

It is, I believe, a word entirely appropriate for this Reformation Sunday, when we celebrate the heritage we derive from a sixteenth-century German priest, who looked around him at a church which had stopped searching out mystery, which seemed comfortable with its claim of ultimate truth and ultimate authority, which seemed to say that faith was a largely completed matter. As I said in *First Matters* this week, we look to Martin Luther, who said *no*, that the faith was ever more expansive than that, and who launched a life-restoring revolution in the church 502 years ago this week. Since then, saints in every generation who were open to further exploration of the mysteries of God's grace have launched subsequent reformations. Today we are the beneficiaries of their courage and insight, and of a Reformed tradition molded by its motto, *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*, "The Church reformed, always reforming," which I would paraphrase for our time to mean, "Always in need of reformation."

We need to remember the Reformation in our time, because there are so many in our churches (and *culture*) today who are no longer persuaded by such a motto, who live their lives in pursuit of the "firm, technical certitude of our age"² and who thus turn the Bible into a collection of moral absolutes, with no room for mystery. Fundamentalists have tried to confine God within several tightly-construed affirmations; others from different directions have made similarly rigid pronouncements about human behavior and thinking, ironically in the name of liberal thought. The power of the Word is lost for such folks because of their prior agenda. Mystery and wonder are lost, for such camps allow little room for questions or variant understandings, little room for loose ends...little room for reformation.

But God, says the apostle Paul, has chosen to destroy the wisdom of the wise and the righteousness of the self-righteous, and has replaced them with the wisdom and righteousness of Christ and His cross. Can any one of us claim to have some final word on why God chose weakness rather than power as the vehicle of reconciling the world to God's own self? Or

² Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1989, 5.

why God chooses a sometimes-faithful, sometimes-unfaithful minority of the earth's people to be bearers of God's news? Can any of us claim to understand why God has regularly, systematically undermined the attempts of those who have sought to build fences around the church, and instead has cast the net of divine love ever wider?

You cannot reduce such mysteries to a few fundamental principles and then claim to have a lock on Christian wisdom and understanding. The Christian faith is dynamic, not static. It is *life*, not principles. It is lived out in an open-table fellowship, not a gated community. To be a Christian is to be a person in touch with mystery, to be aware of the limits of our understanding. That is not to say we should not explore as far as those limits will allow. The life of the mind in the service of God is a long-standing Reformed keystone. But we will discover that some of those explorations, rather than leading to greater clarity and certainty, will only deliver us deeper into the mystery. Mysteries should *engage* our minds, not idle them; and there will always be times when the only appropriate response will be sheer wonder and awe.

Christian faith is anchored in a deep mystery: the mystery of God's relationship with humankind. Not a mystery like a puzzle to be put together, a code to be broken, or a detective story which discloses the culprit on the final page. This mystery stands at the beginning and end of all Christian thought. It represents the limit, the final reaches, of human wisdom and reason. But in such limitation is grace, for it delivers us from all impulses to play God and frees us to be fully human and to *explore* the mystery. If we would honor the Reformation we celebrate today, it will not be by pious pronouncements or by arrogant spiritual pride, but by commitment to the pursuit of mystery and wonder and awe, including the mystery of the power of God to transform human lives.

Do you know the story of Derek Black? Derek Black grew up in a world few of us in this room today can comprehend. The child of two white supremacists, at an early age he became something of a celebrity and a rising star on the circuit of the white nationalists who have gained so much recent attention. By the time he was in his late teens, Derek was already hosting his own radio show. He had launched a white nationalist website for children and had won a local political election in Florida. One white supremacist even called him "the leading light of our movement."

Home-schooled through high school, Derek surprised his family by telling them he wanted to attend Florida's New College, a liberal arts college in Sarasota. His parents were skeptical, given the school's progressive bent, and people in the movement were critical of the choice, warning that the school would change him, but Derek's father told the skeptics, "If anyone is going to be influenced here, it will be them. Soon enough, the whole faculty and student body are going to know who they have in their midst."

It's a longer story than I have time to tell here (I will provide a link to the full account from the *Washington Post* in my sermon notes), but it turned out that Derek's father was both right and wrong. He was right that the student body would find out who Derek was, but he was mistaken that Derek would be the greater influence in his educational endeavor. That distinction belonged to one of Derek's classmates, Matthew Stevenson. Stevenson was an

Orthodox Jew – the only Orthodox Jew in the New College student body at the time – and Derek’s first friend at the college.

Derek’s identity as a white nationalist champion was exposed in an online campus forum while he was studying abroad his sophomore year, and when he returned to campus, he was treated as a pariah. But Matthew Stevenson decided to take a chance. He invited Derek to join some other students at his campus apartment one Friday night for a Shabbat dinner.

Matthew always drank from a kiddush cup and said the traditional prayers, but most of his guests were Christian, atheist, black or Hispanic — anyone open-minded enough to listen to a few blessings in Hebrew. Now, in the fall of 2011, Matthew invited Derek to join them.

It was the only social invitation Derek had received since returning to campus, so he agreed to go. The Shabbat meals had sometimes included eight or 10 students, but this time only a few showed up. “Let’s try to treat [Derek] like anyone else,” Matthew remembered instructing them.

Derek arrived with a bottle of wine. Nobody mentioned white nationalism or the forum, out of respect for Matthew. Derek was quiet and polite, and he came back the next week and then the next, until after a few months, nobody felt all that threatened, and the Shabbat group grew back to its original size.

And that is how it began – the slow, but steady transformation of Derek Black.

Some members of the Shabbat group gradually began to ask Derek about his views, and he occasionally clarified them in conversations and emails throughout 2011 and 2012.... He said he didn’t believe in violence or the KKK or Nazism or even white supremacy, which he insisted was different from white nationalism. He [said] his only concern was that “massive immigration and forced integration” was going to result in a white genocide. He said he believed in the rights of all races but thought each was better off ... living separately.³

Over time, though, even those concerns eroded, in part because of what he was learning in class, and even more due to what he was learning from his friends – gathered around prayers, sharing a meal together, and exploring the mysteries of community one with another. The rigid certitude was giving way, and Derek was changing, reforming, awakening to a new way of understanding the world, his neighbors, and himself. And it all began when someone had the courage and thoughtfulness to reach across a chasm of difference and invite him to share a sacred meal. A simple act, and yet a profound mystery at work! What a different world we might inhabit, if others were willing to embrace the mystery! Holy mystery... holy possibility.

³ Eli Saslow, “The White Flight of Derek Black,” https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-white-flight-of-derek-black/2016/10/15/ed5f906a-8f3b-11e6-a6a3-d50061aa9fae_story.html, accessed October 8, 2019.

One summer day years ago, I was with our daughter in the backyard of our home in South Carolina. She was just three years old at the time and had not yet developed her later aversion to bugs, and that day she became fascinated by a column of ants marching in single-file along the back edge of our patio. For a long time, she walked back and forth across the concrete, tracking a single ant until it disappeared into the grass, then returning to follow another. At one point, in a moment forever etched in family lore, she stopped, put her hands on her hips and said, “Dad, you should see this! This is just amazing!”

It is amazing, really, how the mystery that often eludes us can startle us at times and stir in us a deep sense of wonder. For even a tiny creature, in Walt Whitman’s terms, “is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.”⁴ And if it’s true of an ant, then what about the ever-expansive grace of God?

“Dad,” she said, “You should see this! This is just amazing!” And it was amazing. But I wonder, am *I*... are *we* capable of such amazement in our time? Are we still learning from the world, from the scriptures, from the friends and strangers we meet at table? Are we still willing to reach across differences to try to understand the other, and thus risk learning something new about ourselves? Are we open to the new thing God may be doing today? Or is everything all neatly tied up, with no loose ends? Am *I*... are *we*... too wedded to our assumptions? Too sophisticated for mystery?

Well, they’re just questions ...for Reformation Sunday.

⁴Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” Part 31. Whitman wrote of a mouse, however, not an ant.

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey work of the stars,/And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren,/And the tree-toad is a chef-d’oeuvre for the highest,/And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven,/And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery,/And the cow crunching with depress’d head surpasses any statue,/And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.