

**St. Mark's, Niagara-on-the-Lake**  
**The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, year 'B'**  
**12 September 2021 (proper 24)**  
**The Rev'd Leighton Lee**

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It's considered a compliment to be called smart—as in, “The smartest person I know.” The word conjures up competence, know-how, and even brilliance. But being called smart may not necessarily be a compliment, either. Smart alecks think they know everything; the smart part of town is, by implication, better from other, lesser parts of town; words that smart are painful—and so on. In other words, being smart isn't necessarily all that it's cracked up to be. But being wise? That's a different matter altogether.

It's the difference between learning and experience. Of the two, learning seems to be the thing our society values right now. And not learning for learning's sake, but learning as something to be commodified be it in Silicon Valley or on Bay Street. Well—who cares? All of these smart people with their learning have created the modern world which all of us benefit from and enjoy. What's more, without them we wouldn't have the wondrous vaccines which are helping us to overcome this pandemic. So at its best “being smart” is both commendable and desirable. But unless this is grounded in, or tempered by, wisdom, there's likely to be trouble.

Alas, while there's a surfeit of smarts these days, there's a corresponding dearth of wisdom. What's worse, the truths which are grounded in wisdom's experience are so often dismissed—and even derided. A cartoon recently made the rounds on social media which captures the mood of our times perfectly. It shows a man sitting in front of a computer calling out to his partner in the next room, “Honey, come look! I've found some information all the world's top scientists and doctors missed.” For too many people, the voice of wisdom and rationality is now just something else to filter out amidst the white noise of life.

This morning we heard Jesus say, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Such a directive seems neither wise nor rational—which is probably why Father Benson of Cowley once said that when Constantine picked up the cross, the Church put it down. And it's true: for much of its history, the Church has ignored the divine command to be a prophetic and wise voice calling the world to justice, peace, and love. Meaning it hasn't been a place of wisdom borne out of experience.

Now, that probably sounds like a strange thing to say. Surely the Church is one of the wisest institutions around. You don't survive for two thousand years by being dumb. Maybe. But then again, the thing that counts where survival's concerned isn't necessarily wisdom but cunning. After all, being told to take up a cross and follow hardy sounds like a strategy for survival. And survival, not surrender, is the name of

the game these days—and always has been, I guess. Yet sometimes we're given grace to see the exception that proves the rule. The exception that should *be* the rule.

I know I'm not alone in having been quite moved by the coverage of 9/11's twentieth anniversary yesterday. All of the stories of how so many members of the emergency services heroically surrendered their lives are almost too much to bear—even at this distance. But I was also moved thinking about the unwilling surrender of innocence those events forced upon us, innocence which now looks naive—even quaint. On Friday a friend and classmate—still my best friend among all my clerical friends—texted me as he was watching some coverage: "I can't help but have tears in my eyes and I suppose it takes me back to a very innocent time in both our lives which is so gone in many ways."

In the days following the attacks, there was a big service at St Thomas, Fifth Avenue, the grand—and VERY socially smart—Episcopal church for all the British ex-pats who had died when the towers collapsed. Some time later, the Queen sent a personal letter to the rector thanking him and the parish for what they had done. It contained these words of deep wisdom: "Grief is the price we pay for love." Those words are now carved into the pillar behind the church's pulpit above which hangs an image of the crucified.

The time has come for us to be re-awakened to the deep truth that if we want to be wise, we must first surrender. All of us know that to love another means surrender: surrender both of body and soul and emotional control. It's risky and the outcome, be it joy or grief, is never assured. Yet unless we wish to remain in emotional and physical stasis what other choice is there but surrender? We cannot receive the wondrous gift of love with folded arms and clenched fists. And this personal, intimate truth must also be translated into the public and institutional parts of our lives, too.

I don't know—did President Biden and the rest give in too easily—surrender—last month when they pulled out of Afghanistan? What he said to the American people and the world when he explained why he did what he did sounded to me like words of wisdom. To me it seems wiser to have pulled out than it ever did to go in. Seeking to use military force to effect regime change turned out to be a huge miscalculation. Twenty years later, and what do we have to show for it but 158 dead Canadian soldiers—and countless more from other countries—their lives surrendered in a hopeless cause?

Well, hopeless if we don't wise up and learn that this is no way to run the world. Which reminds me of something a preacher once said. He began his sermon by pointing to a crucifix and saying, "What a way to run the universe." What a way indeed. Yet it is the only way. Love is the only way, the self-giving love summed up in the image of the crucified Christ who dared to open his arms and hands so wide in love that hateful ignorance tried to nail him down.

Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." The cross isn't a bespoke object, crafted to suit our taste and comfort. Nor is for the faint of heart. To surrender to Christ's invitation and run the risk of losing it all for the sake of the Kingdom isn't easy. But don't forget that it's a kingdom in which spilled blood is exchanged for new life, where numbing ignorance is displaced by discerning wisdom, and where even hate and death have no power. And if, even with open hearts and open souls, we fail or are partly destroyed in our efforts to build God's kingdom of wisdom and peace in a world of stupidity and hatred, we will have failed as Christ failed: in a victory of love.