

King of Nothing

Luke 22:24-27

1 Timothy 3:1-13

Do you remember the Seals and Crofts song “King of Nothing”? It starts like this: “When I was 17, I dreamed of being king. And having everything I wanted. But that was long ago and my dreams did not unfold, so I’m still the King of Nothing.”

King of nothing. Ummmmm?

Hold those lyrics for just a few minutes and we’ll get back to them.

When Delbridge preached his now infamous sermon *Thirty Theses For Thinking (About)*, many of us thought a lot of it while a few didn’t think much of it. Some of those who didn’t think much of it not only didn’t think much of the sermon they also didn’t think much of me for allowing Delbridge to preach such a sermon from the pulpit. It was at that point I realized we had some serious “What does it mean to be Baptist?” education to do. The response of some to Delbridge’s sermon also indicated to me that we had a severe case of religious culture shock on our hands.

It reminded me of a story about two wonderful former Wedgewoodians. Ted and Judy came to Charlotte from the Hoosier state, from Indiana. They came to Charlotte and, as fate would have it, on their arrival to the south, during their first hour in the Queen city, at their initial stop in their new place of habitation, they ate breakfast at a country restaurant. Yes they did. And bagels and cream cheese and fancy omelets were not on the menu. No, they weren’t. So they ordered eggs and bacon and toast and coffee. But their waitress being the nice Southerner she was and being aware they wasn’t from around here and wanting to demonstrate some Southern hospitality, well, she had grits put on their plate, compliments of the waitress. I’m not lying. Well, when Ted and Judy looked at their plates with this white glob of stuff with a sand texture on it they looked at each other with the raised eyebrows question mark facial grimace.----- Well, they were too shocked to say anything right then and there, but a few minutes later when their waitress checked up on their coffee cups they asked, “What are these?” “Why, honey,” she responded, “them there is grits.” At which point the waitress plopped down in the booth, took one of their knives, got some butter, dropped the butter in the grits and with a fork stirred them real good. And said, “That’s how you eat grits.”

Culture shock. A bad case of culture shock. A what have we gotten ourselves into sick feeling in their stomachs.

And so I have empathy with, my heart goes out to, anyone who comes to a real Baptist church without any foreknowledge or warning about Baptists. A non-Baptist in a Baptist church is like a non-Southerner in a southern restaurant being introduced to grits. Am I telling the truth?----- Yes, I am. Baptists, real Baptists, are downright strange, weird, different, peculiar. But strange and weird and different and peculiar, we believe, for good reasons.

Baptists, real Baptists, that is, not pseudo Baptists, not fake Baptists, not Baptist in name only Baptists----real Baptists believe in what we call the competency of the soul. Or some call it soul freedom. Basically, it's the idea that each one of us has enough brains to work on our own theological beliefs and we don't need anyone forcing their theological mess down our throats. It's not that we don't need other people, their insights and wisdom. This is not abject individualism. It's just that to us coerced faith is not a valid faith.

We also believe, if we know our Baptist history, we believe in the priesthood of believers. Which is to say that in the Baptist church there is no human higher authority. We all stand on level ground. There is no inner circle. There is no hierarchy, no pecking order, no chain of command, no caste system. Nobody is closer to Jesus because of his or her position or role in the church. The hierarchy in a Baptist Church has only two levels: God and then all of us. In a Baptist church there are no middle managers, no distribution centers.

A corollary of soul freedom and the priesthood of believers is this: you can't control Baptists. You can talk to them, try to persuade them, reason with them, but you can't coerce them or control them. One person, be it a pastor or whomever, can't control other Baptists. Yes, an entire Baptist congregation can set up some rules and parameters and some controls. An entire Baptist congregation can provide church discipline, but not one person, not even the preacher if, if it's a real Baptist church can keep anybody straight. And if a Baptist church as a whole were to set up some boundaries or provide discipline to an individual it would have to be extremely careful because the loss of freedom of any one member would put the church at great risk of no longer being Baptist.

Of course, I am aware that control even in Baptist churches falls along a continuum. I'm just noting, I'm just stressing that Baptists historically have erred on the side of freedom.

Baptists are like cats. They are hard to train. You can put your dog in obedience school, but try it with your cat. Try it with a Baptist. You'll be wasting your money.

So my first response to anyone that didn't like Delbridge's sermon is to let you know that as a bona fide Baptist you can ignore it, you can write it off as a bad sermon. Hopefully, you found the fellowship of the community or the music or the prayers or something else meaningful on that day. Personally, though, I hope you don't ignore Delbridge's sermon because I believe Delbridge in this sermon has much to teach me and. But as a Baptist you can disagree with me and you can just ignore the sermon. I've had a few of mine ignored. It's not the end of the world. But do realize this. And this is my second response to those who didn't like the sermon. Realize this: the pulpit is not mine. It's the church's. Yes, because I do ask people to fill in for me in my absence in one sense I do have some control of the pulpit, but I do not have ultimate control of it. If I were to kick Delbridge off the preaching list, and I wouldn't even think of doing that for a second, but if I were inclined to do so, I am confident that at the next congregational meeting I would be instructed by a vote of Wedgewoodians to put Delbridge back on the list. The Baptists in these woods do not take kindly to having chains placed on their pulpit. The Baptists in these woods fortunately know their Baptist history.

And---and the Baptists in these steeples from what I've seen do a good job of keeping in mind something Jesus said. When the disciples were posturing for power and control and status he told them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them . . . but it shall not be so with you . . ."

Don't lord it over them. Has anyone at your place of employment or in your family lorded it over you lately, used their power and position in a way that was harmful to you or someone you care about? It's not fun, is it? It's humiliating,-----belittling,-----degrading,----- crushing.

Don't lord it over them, Jesus said. So what does the early church go and do? Right off the bat, they start doing exactly what Jesus said not to do. Read it in the New Testament. It's plain to see. In the gospels nowhere, nowhere do we find Jesus talking about bishops and elders and deacons, but what does the early church go and do? Exactly what it wasn't supposed to do.

It's not too late, it's not too late to turn the ship in another direction. It's not too late to correct a major misstep of the early Church.

Don't Lord it over them. And yet, did you notice the typo in the bulletin a two Sundays ago when I was not present due to illness. I put in the bulletin a passage from Luke's gospel and I was supposed to have typed Christ the Lord, but what I typed was Chris the Lord. Ooops. Subconscious coming out.

I'd like to be Lord. In fact, I was wondering if any of you would be willing to bow down to me three times right now? And I like the thought of people jumping when I snap my fingers. [Snap fingers.] Why aren't you jumping?

Chris the Lord. I don't think so. If I'm Lord at Wedgewood I'm not doing a very good job. I'm not having very good results. As it turns out, some of my wonderful, perfect, inspired, brilliant ideas have gotten little or no support whatsoever.

A few years ago I spent a lot of time trying to convince Wedgewoodians we needed to renovate our sanctuary. Well, thank God we got rid of those depressing yellow windows, but all the other ideas about renovation (pew chairs, drama stage, different worship focal points, a round communion table), well, the ideas never got past a handful of support. So I dropped it. Had to. No choice. You can lead a Baptist horse to water but the Baptist horse may think the water is polluted and not drink it.

Another idea I had was to incorporate multimedia into our worship. Not go crazy with it, but incorporate it. A few liked the idea, but not enough. So----so I dropped it. Back to the drawing board.

I thought, in my infinite wisdom and my advanced foresight, that Wedgewood should go in more debt. Do all the repairs we thought we would need in the next fifteen years, the roof, the parking lot, etc., and do the multimedia and sanctuary renovation all in one \$60,000 package. After all, our debt then was \$60,000 and doubling that amount was not that much debt for even a small church. I argued that and got nowhere, not even to first base.

Another one of my fantastic, splendid ideas was for Wedgewood to be dually aligned, aligned with the American Baptist and also the UCC, the United Church of Christ. I handed out brochures on the UCC. I arranged for the regional association minister to preach at Wedgewood and we did a question and answer session with him after a meal. And at the end of the process I think I convinced one other person that dual alignment was a good idea.

Chris the Lord. I don't think so. And while it's a nice fantasy, in reality, I wouldn't want it either, wouldn't want it because I like being Baptist and with Baptists there's only one Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Of course, saying I am not a Lord does not mean I do not have any authority. I do have authority, authority I plan to use until the day I die, but it's just a different type of authority. The authority I have is a chance. People give me as their Pastor a chance to persuade. People listen to me, give me their ears, and I get to make a case. They may not listen long, but they will listen. They will give me a chance.

The other aspect of my authority is the authority which comes from who I am and how I live. It's the authority of an example. My authority is not, Chris said so so we are going to do it. My authority is, I've noticed Chris doing this and I think Jesus would do it and I am therefore going to consider doing it myself or support others doing it.

Listen to me, listen to me especially those of you who have teenagers. One day the teenagers will go off to college, go off to work or simply just go off. But one way or another they will go off and they one day will cross the county line in their Ford Mustand convertible with the top down and we no longer will be able to tell them what to do. What authority will we have then? "Free at last, free at last, free at last from my parents. Thank God almighty I'm free at last," they will say.

They'll cross the county line and they can do what they want to do when they want to do it. They can stay out as long as they want to stay out. They can hang out with who they want to hang out. They can even leave their clothes on the floor if they so desire. And at that point the only authority we will have will be the authority of the life we have lived. The only authority we will have will be the authority of our example. And as your Pastor, that's the kind of authority I have.

Permit me to close with two stories.

A Wedgewoodian who is, how say I shall it, a Wedgewoodian who is no longer with us came to me seven or so years ago and asked permission to show a film on abortion to his Sunday School class. It was a graphic film that showed a fetus in the later stages being aborted. As he described it, the movie was pretty gruesome. I told him permission was not mine to grant or deny. Sunday Schools at Wedgewood do what they want to do with or without my consent. I told him that and I then I told him this: All I ask is that you be aware that there is a possibility that people in your class unbeknownst to you or to me may have had an abortion. I told him that and left it at that.

Well, he never showed the movie, but it wasn't because I told him not to or because I got on the phone and tried to convince his Sunday School members not to allow the movie to be shown.

Story number 2.

In the downstairs of the fellowship hall there are two bathrooms. In the 1960's when signage was made for one of the rooms a mistake was made. The sign was supposed to say "Powder room". As it turns out, the "d" was left out" and so the sign read "Power room". Nobody noticed and they put up a sign on the door to a john that read "Power room." Kinda funny, isn't it? I'd come to work and have to be excused and I would go into the power room. Well, Marge Fowler thought it was funny also and so she took the sign off the bathroom door and put it on the church office door. Notice she didn't put it on my office door. Anyway, the sign stayed on the office door for awhile, but now it's gone. It's disappearance is a Wedgewood mystery. Perhaps some Baptist ghost removed it. Who knows. But whoever removed it is a true Baptist and we need to thank him or her or it for doing it because the last thing we need at Wedgewood is a power room, a room with people in it who think they have anymore power than anyone else. Amen!

Don't lord it over them, Jesus said. Aren't you tired of people lording it over you? You have to put up with so much of that stuff in the work place and in families. We really don't need any of that here at church, do we?

King of nothing. King of nothing, but Pastor of a small church with a big vision. And that's just fine with me.