

“Stupid is as stupid does”
First Reading: Colossians 3:14-17
Second Reading: 1 Samuel 8:4-20

People are stupid. I say that not as an accusation, but as an acknowledgement. After all, we are part of a tradition that talks about total depravity, so the stupid part is pretty much a given. Perhaps the only proper use of the word stupid is when the speakers acknowledge that we, too, are carriers of the stupid gene. It's a universal affliction along with those other maladies inherent in the human condition — weird and strange. People are weird. People are strange. Case in point — A couple of weeks ago we were in Vienna, and we walked into a pen store ... you know, what every tourist does in Vienna.

I don't know, I have occasion to write a little bit; I like pens, not fountain pens, mind you. I'm left handed, and the only thing left-handed people can do with a fountain pen is make a mess. Yet, I seem to have a fondness for those little pocket pens, the kind of pen men can carry around in their pocket without risking serious injury to themselves. And, as any good germaphobe will tell you, a pocket pen is great to have available because those pens at the bank or doctor's office are country clubs for germs.

So, we came across a pen store in Vienna, and we went in. Lo, and behold, I discovered not one, but two very cool, reasonably priced little pocket pens, so which would I choose? One, opened with a click, and the other opened with a squeeze. God forbid that the pen would leak and bleed into my khakis; therefore, I needed to factor that into the choice. So, I'm clicking one and squeezing the other, clicking one and squeezing the other...

Finally, Donna says, "Just so you know, we're getting both." So, we bought the pens and headed out to tour another cathedral. It was only then I realized how close I was to not being with you today. You see, as we walked out of the store, Donna with that sweet and soft Southern lilt in her voice, calmly said, "I'm glad we bought those, because if you had clicked that pen one more time, I was going to have to kill you."

People are stupid. People are weird. People are strange. I need to remember that I am numbered among "*the people*" whenever I say such things, because of late, I have heard myself making these statements a lot.

People are stupid. People are weird. People are strange. We make odd choices. We are so easily sucked in by outlandish conspiracy theories or bizarre trends. In the blink of an eye the fashion world went from skinny

jeans to big pants, from tucked to untucked, from six-inch heels to four-inch platform soles, and nobody asked why before lighting up our credit cards. It is entertaining to watch the folks wearing the four-inch platform soles, especially when combined with the six-inch heels, along with the big pants as they try to walk. *Whoa, whoa, they're going down!* The orthopedic surgeons are loving this. Of course, old folks like me laugh at it, but are loathe to confess that we were once lined up at the shoe store to buy earth shoes. Remember that? *Hey, wouldn't it be great to pretend we're always walking uphill?*

People are weird. Someday historians and archaeologists are going to be slapping their foreheads, asking, *“What the...? What were they thinking?”* This week, I read an article on the announcement of this year’s list of the world’s ten best restaurants. The best of the best. Alas, McDonalds didn’t make the list, but on the menus offered at these bougie bistros, if you can get a reservation, you can order such delicacies as — pigeon aged in beeswax; or, maybe insect tacos will tempt your palate; or perhaps cactus sorbet. It’s all a bargain at \$500 per person.

Why do we choose what we choose; do what we do; follow who we follow; vote how we vote; want what we want? Why do we so consistently lend credence to Forrest Gump's favorite proverb — "Mama says, 'Stupid is as stupid does.'" Yes, we do. Yes, we do.

Could Forrest's proverb have been on God's mind, and perhaps on Samuel's lips, when the Israelites clamored for a king? *Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, "You are old (Ooh, that stings just a bit, but don't get any ideas here for the annual congregational meeting.) and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations."*

Huh? A king! A king? Have you forgotten what our ancestors spent 40 years in the wilderness to escape from? Don't you remember the last time you had a king? Pharaoh. And how was that working out for you? Have you even read the covenant that was made on Mt. Sinai? *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me."*

Have you forgotten how Moses prayed after our boneheaded idea of crafting a golden calf? *"O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this*

is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.”

Shall we disregard what Moses said before he left us? *“You stand assembled today ... to enter into the covenant of the Lord your God, sworn by an oath, which the Lord your God is making with you today; in order that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you and as he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.*

Have we erased from our collective memory the challenge Joshua gave us when we finally made it to this holy land? *“I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive-yards that you did not plant ... choose this day whom you will serve ... but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”* Had Israel forgotten all of that? Samuel was apoplectic.

“But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, “No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our

battles.” Well, we can guess what Samuel was thinking — Stupid is as stupid does.

A little backstory would be helpful here. Samuel was a miracle baby and an early prophet. His mother, Hannah, was barren at a time when Israel’s prospects certainly were not the stuff of headlines. Desperate and despairing, Hannah cried out to the Lord, and through her tears promised that if she bore a child, she would dedicate that child to the Lord’s service. The local priest, Eli, heard the commotion and assumed Hannah was drunk, deranged, or both. He wasn’t so much interested in coming to Hannah’s aid, as he was interested in getting her to leave the temple. So, half-heartedly, he basically said, I hope that works out for you. Go in peace ... but please, just go.

And talk about your words coming back to bite you, Hannah did give birth to a child, Samuel, who before too long, would supplant Eli; and not only that, Samuel would become the last of Israel’s judges.

You see, once these former slaves of Pharaoh reached the Promised Land, they did not set up a formal governmental structure or hierarchy. As enemies encroached or challenges arrived, individuals, who would be

remembered as judges, arose to lead the people in the face of a threat. Certainly, there was a need for some structure for governance, but the notion of kingship would contradict the very idea of covenant, because at the core of the covenant was the principle that God, alone, was sovereign.

Yet, this promised land was in decline and in disarray primarily, not because of the lack of an administration, but because of the disobedience and self-interest of the people. As is noted several times in the book of Judges, “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”

Dissatisfied with their own condition, the Israelites looked around the neighborhood and assumed that the grass was greener anywhere but at home. *Why can't we be like them? They have a king. Why can't we have one? Their chariots look snazzier. Their horses look stronger. Why can't we have those?*

You get the drift? I'm guessing you are familiar with the impulse. *Mom, all the kids at school have one; why can't I? Get it? I'm not happy. They're having a party. I want to be them!* One flaw in our humanity is the compulsion to assume all dissatisfaction is the consequence of external

factors and never the consequence of internal dysfunction. *I'm not happy, so it has to be your fault, your failure, your mismanagement ... mom, dad, teachers, boss, school, church, government. It's your fault. So ... you - fix it ... you - apologize ... you - correct it ... you - make me happy.*

What was true three millennia ago in ancient Israel and is so clearly evident in our world today is that it is far easier to blame than it is to roll up our sleeves and make a difference. Have you noticed that most political campaigns promise solutions but only offer blame? How's that working out for us? What does Forrest say? Stupid is as stupid does.

When governance starts looking like a reality show, a bad soap opera, a Jerry Springer slugfest, isn't it time to remember that it is far easier to blame than it is to roll up our sleeves and make a difference? You don't like what you see, how they behave? Then get engaged, get involved. There are far too few thoughtful, benevolent, trustworthy, decent, rational people who are engaged and involved. I know they are out there. I see those qualities in you week after week. There are scores of people here with a broad diversity of perspectives that I wouldn't hesitate to vote for, not because I agree with

them on everything, but because I can trust them to be thoughtful, ethical, rational, and committed to the common good.

We'll never find the common good if the good do not get engaged and involved. If we just persist with the blame game, then all we're going to get is more shouting, more spleen splitting, more fools with a microphone, more chaos. You don't like what you see, how they behave? Then get engaged, get involved. Do something novel — seek the common good.

The people complaining to Samuel and demanding a king were obsessed with external factors and failing to ponder the consequences of internal dysfunction. As we read in Judges, *“All the people did what was right in their own eyes.”* And that is seldom a constructive game plan. What's the refrain today? *I'm fighting for my freedom. I want the freedom to do what I want, and what I want is the freedom to tell you what you can't do.* Well, that wouldn't work then anymore than it is working now.

But rather than listening for God's voice, rather than shifting from self-involvement to self-reflection and self-giving, rather than joining together to do the hard work of pursuing the common good, the Israelites demanded that Samuel fix their problems by imitating their neighbors. “We

are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.”

But here is the surprising shift in our story, God lets them have their king, and every parent can understand why. Sometimes you have to let them fail. *Okay ... if that's what you want ... Lord knows, you're not listening to me ... so go ahead, have your king ... BUT let me give you a little preview of what is in store for you — A king will take your sons and daughters and they'll be the ones on the front lines of those battles ... kings spend their lives, not pursuing the common good, but only the king's good ... He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers (Right Vladimir?) ... He'll take the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. And in that day you will cry out because of your king...*”

Sometimes, you have to let the children, the people, the nation fail. And fail the people gloriously did. There would be highs and lows, but throughout the monarchy, from Saul to David to Solomon to Rehoboam to Jeroboam to Ahab to Jehoiakin, there was profound dysfunction, a fraying of purpose, a failure of faithfulness, a dismantling of community.

The Lord, here, had no interest in identifying with or endorsing a particular form of human governance. God wasn't working to form a government; God was forming a people, a people who would listen and learn and follow. Jesus said, *"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me..."* And also, *"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me"* The Psalmist exults, *"I will meditate on your precepts, and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word ... How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth. Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."*

God wasn't working to form a government; God was forming a people, a people who would listen and learn and follow, a people who would manifest the fruit of God's Spirit for the public good — *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control*. God was seeking to form such a people, for such a people would only then possess the capacity to pursue the common good. Will we ... Shall we ... For such a time as this? Amen.