

Getting Your Sibilant Right: The Evangelical Shibboleth

Judges 12:1-6; I Corinthians 1:10-31

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“Sibilant” is an “s” sound; the word comes from the Latin that means “hiss.” The Hebrew alphabet has four sibilants: *samek*, *stade*, *sin*, and *shin*. A “sin” looks like a three-pronged candle stick with a dot over one corner. A “shin” looks the same, except that the dot is over the other corner. Say these four sibilants: *samek*, *stade*, *sin*, *shin*.

I.

I tell you this so that we can read the text from Judges knowingly. The narrative concerns a conflict and eventually war between the Israelite tribe of Ephraim and the tribe of Gilead led by Jephthah. Over time fugitives from Ephraim fled east across the Jordan and proposed to sign on with the enemy Gilead led by Jephthah. While the Gilead army needed recruits, it was highly suspicious of these fugitives, fearing that they could not be trusted. In order to trust their identity and their loyalty, the Gileadites devised a linguistic test, asking the fugitives to say the word “Shibboleth” with a shin, the three candle letter with a dot over it. When the fugitives tried to pass the test of dialect, they were in fact Ephraimites and so enemies; they mispronounced the test word because they had the wrong sibilant and said, “Sibboleth.” They used the wrong sibilant, *sin*, the three-pronged candle with a dot over the other corner. The narrative reports, “They could not say it right.” And so they were identified as outsiders who did not know the tribal mantra, and they were executed. The text says 42,000 were killed. It was unacceptable and dangerous not to know the right sibilant and not to know the tribe-identifying dialect. The narrative ends with the report that Jephthah governed and died, a conclusion that sounds affirmative. To be successful he had to identify those who had the wrong sibilant.

II.

Then I got to thinking: I wondered if the church might have a dialect that we expect people to get right, as with the correct sibilant. After that I concluded, well yes, we have such a shibboleth that is known to insiders and that can easily identify outsiders who do not know the language, practice, or the wonder of the gospel.

Paul begins his First Letter to the Corinthians with an honest recognition that there is a division in the congregation there. Its members have chosen up sides following different leaders, variously Paul or Apollos, or Cephas, or Christ. They have divided up the gospel, championing their own clichés, ideologies, and party lines, none of which had the right sibilant or the right tribe-identifying mantra. Paul condemns those who have false dialects and are ignorant of gospel truth. He scolds those who do not know enough to get it right.

And then Paul, with a deep breath, gives us what is surely the most eloquent and

authoritative presentation of our tribal code as his summation of the gospel. It is in three parallels. First, the membership identifying mark is this: The *foolishness of God* is *wiser* than human wisdom. What a mouthful! Paul knew about human wisdom. He was a learned Jew. He had engaged with the worldly wisdom of the Greek philosophers. He knew about the organizational genius of Rome. Were he alive now, he would have mastered the electronic arts of computer, I-pad, facebook, and twitter. He knew his way around the world!

But he understood that the foolishness of the cross contradicted all of that capacity for mastery. For the cross, emblematic of Jesus' entire life, is a totem of risk-taking self-abandonment. Against his erstwhile stringent orthodoxy, Paul understood that God is self-giving and self-risking and self-emptying, and that Jesus is an agent of such self-giving, self-risking, self-emptying foolishness who could not possibly cut any ice in the real world. It is so foolish to give one's life away for the world. It is so stupid to give one's self away for the neighbor.

And so the church, from the outset, was tempted already at Corinth to be wise, shrewd, and effective, to imitate the way of the world, to package the mystery of the gospel in human reasoning that can yield certitude and compelling conclusions that will withstand the reasoning of the world. It has turned out, however, that when the church imitates the wisdom of the world, it forgets its summons to evangelical foolishness; it becomes prudent and calculating in a way that mocks the foolishness of its own gospel truth.

Second, the membership identifying mark is this: The *weakness of God* is *stronger* than human strength. What a mouthful! Paul knew about human strength. He was quite familiar with the Roman legions and sometimes appealed to Rome for his own safety and security. In the book of Acts, he is often in communication with Roman authorities, and he surely knew the gospel narrative of the Roman governor and the Roman centurion, and the Roman execution on a Friday afternoon. He knew that such power would prevail.

But for less than forty-eight hours! Only from Friday afternoon until Sunday at dawn. He knew the Easter recital of the earliest church. At the end of this epistle, moreover, he will report that "last of all, the risen Christ also appeared to me." He was fully aware of the power of the world but was fully convinced that the weakness of Christ had prevailed in the face of the empire. The authorities who managed such mastery were regularly bamboozled by this weak, vulnerable Jesus, so that his cross has become a totem for the truth of God's self-emptying vulnerability.

That effective vulnerability, however, is a great embarrassment in the church. It is an embarrassing scandal to imagine that such self-emptying weakness could prevail over real power. It is an intellectual impossibility, so that we make every interpretive maneuver we can imagine; it is a myth; it is a metaphor. We can easily see that the earliest evangelists were bamboozled by the prevailing of Easter vulnerability; it did not fit their explanatory categories any more than it does ours. So they tried to say it in many ways, and it nearly cannot be said. It defies our intellect. But more than that, it defies our pragmatic common sense. We appeal to a business model for his church. We reduce the mystery to program and budget and building and membership rolls; they all turn out to be empty of transformative potential, because they have been too much grounded in an alien sibilant. Thus we learn over and over many times that the true sibilant of the weakness of God has transformative power. We appeal to Mother

Teresa and Martin Luther King and the all-stars in vulnerability that have made such a difference. We do not need, however, to look so far. The weak ones are active among us everywhere; they are those who are naïve and innocent and vulnerable and self-giving, who never make the vestry or the session, but who persist in self-giving generosity... because they know the correct sibilant.

Third, the membership identifying mark is this: The *poverty of God is richer* than human wealth. What a mouthful! I did indeed transport this third element to our text from II Corinthians 8, because it completes the evangelical triad. In that chapter Paul is busy making a fund appeal to help the needy church in Jerusalem. In a most stunning statement in which Paul asks for money, he makes a Christological appeal. Here is his formulation that contradicts our assumed supply-side economics: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (v. 9). This lyrical formulation is a monetized version of the Philippian hymn: “He was in the form of God... though he was rich; He emptied himself... for our sake he became poor; God has highly exalted him... That by his poverty he might make many rich.”

Who knew that self-giving could enrich others? Who knew that instead of fear of contamination from touching a leper, touching a leper with gospel flesh would heal? Who knew that by taking no thought to what you would eat or where you would live, it turns out that your heavenly Father knows what you need and all these things will be added to you? There is an urgent reason that so many of the parables of Jesus are cast in economic matter—the rich fool, workers who came late, the banquet for all, Lazarus and the rich man, and so on and on. Jesus is effecting a transformation of the economy away from the wealth of the world that of itself has no life-giving capacity.

But of course that evangelical poverty that makes others rich is very hard for us. It is hard for us who are depression babies. It is hard for those of us who are young and want it all now. It is hard for Boomers who expect well-being to keep growing to maximum share. It is hard for all of us now who need to “update” all the old luxuries that have become indispensable necessities. So we devise excuses that justify our parsimonious wealth. And then Pope Francis shows up in a Fiat to remind us that we know better.

What an evangelical shibboleth!

The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom;
The weakness of God is stronger than human strength;
The poverty of God is richer than human wealth.

And we, to the contrary, do not have our sibilant right! We imagine our better way:

Do not be foolish; be prudent;
Do not be weak; work from strength;
Do not be poor; because nice guys finish last.

But we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks,

Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (vv. 23-25)

III.

We know enough about this true evangelical shibboleth to know that this sibilant is too dangerous, too costly, and too demanding. It contradicts everything we know; it contradicts the need to be smart in the ways of the world; it contradicts the need to be powerful in the ways of the world. It contradicts the need to be rich and masterful in the ways of the world.

As a result, we tone down, we compromise, we explain away by a rule of *prudence*, *privilege*, and *parsimony*: *Prudence* as wisdom; *Privilege* based in power; *Parsimony* that lets us pretend generosity. We have, moreover, done this rendering with the wrong sibilant long enough that it seems proper and faithful and persuasive to us. For that reason it sounds ok to us to say "shibboleth" when the right tribal identity marker in our own dialect is "shibboleth."

IV.

The truth, however, is that people like us... we preachers... are designated to lead communities that know and trust and believe and practice the faithful evangelical shibboleth. We are called to live right in the midst of that contradiction that we know so well in our own lives. We are called to stand by and with folk who walk, often inadvertently, into that contradiction and are bamboozled by it.

I do not need to tell you that the dominant way of wisdom, power, and wealth has not kept its promise and is not able to keep its promise. It is a credible argument that the mess we are in... about race, environment, violence, and poverty... has come from our uncritical reliance upon worldly wisdom that knows too much, upon worldly power that controls too much, and upon worldly wealth that owns too much. So this could be our time when we embrace a metric other than that imposed upon us by the world. That evangelical metric is not about members or dollars or program or pensions. It is about the neighborhood. Thus Paul can write in this same chapter:

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters; not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (vv. 26-29)

God chose what is foolish, people like us in the church. *God chose what is weak* in the world, people like us in the church. *God chose what is poor* in the world, people like us in the church.

God chose us with the true shibboleth of foolishness, weakness, and poverty to offer an alternative to the deathly way of the world. Paul concludes: "He (God) is the source of our life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'" (vv. 30-31). God is the source of our life in

Christ, not our wisdom, not our strength, not our wealth. Paul, in these verses alludes to Jeremiah who said it this way: “Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth, but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight” (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

Sisters and brothers, take a deep breath and give thanks. Our assignment is not for the sake of wisdom, strength, or wealth. Our ministry depends upon the things of God...righteousness, justice, and steadfast love. The fugitives in the book of Judges could not pronounce it correctly. But we can—and we do! This table is precisely for the foolish, the weak, and the poor; those are the marks of new life, and we bear them gladly.