

**Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer**

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[www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org](http://www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org)

The Depth and Complexity of Life

I Corinthians 2: 10; Jeremiah 32: 9-15

Every Sunday when I look over into what I call, “the McLeod section” of the sanctuary and see Meredith Brooks Sorrel, I cannot help but smile. She will soon be delivering twins into this world, and as the parent of twins, I welcome her and Carter to our “fraternity.”

But my smile signifies more than that. For when I first moved to Charlotte I stayed with the Brooks family, when Meredith and her sister Margaret were young teenagers. I had promised them that when my daughter Clara was born, they would be the first people to see her when I brought her out of the hospital. True to my word, on our way home, I stopped by their house, and they came out on the doorstep to ooh and ahh at her. So when I see Meredith, I see her not only as she is, but as she was, and as she will be, and I see my daughter Clara not only as she is, but as she was -- and as she will be.

On the day when I behold Meredith’s and Carter’s newborns, I will think back to the day she beheld my newborn, though by the time those twins are born my “newborn” may be old enough to drive me to the hospital to see them. Real life is layered with associations and experiences that give a depth and complexity to every moment of existence.

This complexity and depth that God has imprinted upon all creation cries out to the human community for a corresponding depth of commitment, seriousness and discipline.

Yet history is filled with examples where humanity has responded to the depth and complexity of divine creation with destructively shallow simplicity. I offer you just one example.

*The New Yorker* recently featured an article chronicling the AIDS epidemic in South Africa, focusing on a group of politicians and medical workers in that country known as “denialists.” They deny that the AIDS virus is real. Committed to an anti-western pharmaceutical bias, they counsel their people to ignore sophisticated western medicine, suggesting that the way to combat AIDS is by ingesting olive oil, lemons, garlic and African potatoes. Thousands of people die daily of AIDS in that country, and thousands more become infected by the moment, yet in response to this deep and complex problem, an entire government has responded with a destructive superficiality.

I saw a bumper sticker not long ago that read, “IN2IT4FN.”

At one level there is nothing wrong with that.

Everything we do, our work, our play, our relationships, our faith, ought to have an element of fun, or it is not worth doing. Fun is an essential element of life.

But fun is insufficient as a sole philosophy and motivation for living.

Most of us have met people whose pursuit of amusement, whose focus on fun, is their chief motivation in life; over time, such acquaintances strike us as shallow caricatures of human beings.

They take their giftedness for granted, never thinking that their giftedness should be used for the benefit of others around them, or that their giftedness is a sign of their indebtedness.

Such people live like the deer that come into my backyard to eat corn.

They feast without gratitude, never stopping to think that there must be a *provider* of the nourishment.

We expect such behavior of animals, but when human beings live with such blindness

they mar the deep mark of God upon their being.

I have come to the sobering conclusion that an appreciation for the deep things of God can only be fathomed through the experience of loss, through a measure of suffering, Awareness of life's complexity is only gained through an awareness of the dimension of the tragic. I can introduce this profound point through a superficial, yet accessible, example. Like many of you I grew up playing and watching basketball. When I was in college I began coaching basketball. After a while, I thought I knew a good bit about the game. Then I started coaching AAU basketball. It didn't take me long to realize how little I truly knew. I learned that even getting the ball across half-court could become a complex challenge. It took a few humiliating defeats to teach me that I had to start studying basketball in earnest to gain a sufficient appreciation for the depth and complexity of this sport. Isaiah finds himself in the Temple, fulfilling his priestly duties, when he suddenly becomes aware of the presence of God filling the Temple, and he as senses the depth of God's purity and holiness he cries out, "Unclean! Unclean! I am a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips!" To experience God's depth of holiness and purity makes him utterly aware of the shallowness of his character, of the superficial level of his relationship with God, of the destructive lack of spiritual passion within himself and among his people. An angel of the Lord touches his lips with a burning coal, a searing, painful, humiliating experience, but it opens his soul up to the power of God so that he might receive and become a prophet of God's deep truths. Some years ago I read of a conversation between distant business associates who met for dinner. Trying to make small talk, one turned the discussion to family talk and began complaining about the high cost of his children. The doctor bills were so high with the small ones, the grocery bills so high with the big ones, college tuition and weddings were sure to bankrupt him, etc., etc.. Finally, his business associate stopped him and said soberly, "May you never lose sight of the fact that you are greatly blessed to have such costs and challenges as a part of the fabric of your life." Suddenly, the other man remembered that this man had lost his only child in an accident years ago. As he looked into the eyes of that man's deep pain, he sensed the superficiality of his complaints.

We perhaps think that the deep things of God are reserved for the intellectual and the scholarly. In fact, one of the charges brought against religion generally is that it makes people shallow, that our fixation on the transcendent pulls our eyes away from appreciating the depth and complexity of concrete existence. In truth, our faith opens our eyes and illumines our being to see how the transcendent reality of God pierces the depth and complexity that characterizes all things. Paul Tillich, a great scholar himself, once observed that he knew many scholars whose knowledge had enriched their mind but had never nourished their soul, never awakened their inquiry about ultimate matters. Tillich observed that the scholar who knew intimately the truths of the world's hundred greatest books but who never undertook the personal pursuit of wondering why those authors sweated blood to express their truths had less appreciation for the depth of existence than the uneducated construction worker who wondered as he hammered, 'What is life really about? Why exactly am I here?'

This document we call I Corinthians is a frank acknowledgment of the complexity and diversity that can be found in a single church. You had Jews and Gentiles worshipping together for the first time in their lives, each shaped by a culture that was foreign to the other. Throw into that mix women, who had never worshipped with men before, and were so exuberant in their worship enthusiasm that they were creating a disturbance. Some people in that church believed that the end was so near

that they argued that no one in the church should marry.

Paul had some sympathy with that point of view, yet he realized, *I could be wrong*.

He realized that to enforce a marriage ban might not only create a great problem within the church, but it might be contrary to the will of God.

There were people in the church who had grown up eating food sacrificed to idols, and people in the church for whom this act was the sin of sins.

The complexity and diversity within that small congregation was so great that the church was struggling to survive.

Yet Paul, rather than despairing, peeled back layer after layer of the church's complexity until he exposed her soul and promised them that the very Spirit of God could touch them in their common core and create out of their diversity a workable unity, a functional family bound together by the deep truths of God.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians provides a paradigm for how to approach the complexity and depth of life, for he does not throw up his hands at the sheer magnitude of their dissimilar approaches and perspectives, nor does he content himself with chronicling the extent of their failure, or chastising them for the complexity of their inadequacy.

*Rather he writes to give them hope.*

He writes to give them hope and to say that regardless of their differences the power of God's piercing Spirit can knit them together as one.

As I contemplated Biblical examples of penetrating, deep complex actions of faith, my mind turned to that old prophet Jeremiah, who was given the most negative of messages to deliver. He told his people:

No, you are not going to escape conquest by the Babylonians;

no, your Egyptian military alliances are not going to rescue you;

no, you are not going to be spared destruction just because you worship in the beautiful Temple;

yes, you can prepare for destruction, destitution, exile.

Without doubt, Jeremiah's message was one of unmitigated darkness.

But beyond the darkness he spoke a complex word of hope, going to a relative and buying a field.

On the one hand, it was a simple business transaction; on the other it was an action complex and deep.

He who has spoken the harsh, dark word of truth does not allow judgment to be his final word.

By buying a field he spoke a word of ultimate promise, saying,

one day, normalcy will return to this land, land will be bought and sold,

and God will deliver your people back to this place you love.

Even amidst a situation of complex negativity and depth,

Jeremiah found a dramatic way to speak a word of hope.

Likewise, we have a responsibility as Christians to probe beneath the surface of people – and speak a word of hope.

Jesus meets a woman at a well. He asks her, "Do you have a husband?"

When she says no, he could have left that half-lie hang unchallenged.

Instead, he says, "That's true: you have no husband, but you have had five husbands, and the man with whom you are living presently is one to whom you are not married."

She is shocked that Jesus would know her history. *She is shocked even more that he would care.*

A wall of complexity divides them, male and female, Jew and Samaritan, pure prophet and failed, serial lover.

But Jesus sees this woman as I see Meredith: as she was, as she is, and as she can be.

Jesus slices through to the depths of this woman's troubled, restless soul and speaks a word of hope.

Such is our common calling as people of faith.

I cannot help but think of T.S. Eliot's line in his *Murder in the Cathedral*, when his Beckett admits,  
"The last temptation is the greatest treason,  
to do the right deed for the wrong reason."  
He is speaking of the complexity of our behavior:  
our every action is informed by a host of stimuli and influences,  
many of which elude our conscious recognition.  
The ogre Shrek observed,  
we are all onions, and one must peel back our layers in order truly to understand us.  
But a more accurate observation is that we are all diamonds,  
and our multi-faceted natures are only truly illumined by the light of Christ.  
To live in awareness of our complexity and depth,  
to live conscious of the complexity and depth of others –  
these are great and hard challenges.  
To live with an openness to the deep truths of God –  
that is a very great and hard challenge.  
But it is the only way to live.  
Once you have experienced life in its depths,  
you can no longer be satisfied living on the surface.  
So we cry out with Paul,  
"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived,  
what God has prepared for those who love him,  
God has revealed to us through the Spirit.  
For the Spirit searches everything,  
even the deep things of God!"

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