

“The 681 Kilometre Question”  
1 Corinthians 3: 1-9

A Sermon by Rev. Heather Weaver-Orosz  
Emmanuel College Community Worship  
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Perhaps you have heard of the tale I am about to tell... and perhaps I should not be so bold as to call it a tale - for that usually implies something of a fictional transpiring; something stepped down from a story in its import and believability. And yet, regardless of the cultures in which they are told, whether they are cautionary or fairy or folk, we know that tales are told with a purpose beyond their literal account, pointing those with ears to listen toward something, someone that ought not to be missed. And so the label here seems to fit...

It is a tale out of Algoma University, and the marketing campaign launched by their recruiters in the fall of 2009. Specifically targeted at young adults living in the GTA, and even more specifically at those on the cusp of their post-secondary education applications, it was and is called, quite simply, the ‘681 kilometres’ campaign. Comprised mostly of posters placed ever-so-strategically in transit stops adjacent to secondary schools, each ad’s primary feature is a very close-up, almost macro shot of something that they assume might make every parent cringe, and every teenager grin with the knowledge of the cringe.

In one, we see a very exposed midriff, barely touched by a band of shiny gold fabric. In another, it’s a multi-coloured, Mohawk-shaven head. And over-laid on each are the words that ring out across generations of teenage angst, each opening with the same 6 words: “Put 681 kilometres between you and “You’re not going out in that!”... “Put 681 kilometres between you and “Not while you’re living under my roof!”... “Put 681 kilometres between you and “You better be in by ten, mister!”... and on they go. Then, to wrap it all up, the bottom line (both

literally and figuratively) reads: “Plan your escape at [experience.algomau.ca](http://experience.algomau.ca). You’ll love it here.”

The number, of course, represents the distance between Toronto and the Sault. And the point, of course, is that those considering university ought to give strong consideration to the freedom and un-parented self-expression, just waiting to unfold in the safety of the north country.

Within weeks of the campaign release, Algoma received an unprecedented number of complaints... not from parents, not from prospective students’ parents, but from the current Algoma student body. They complained loudly and bitterly about the damage all this was causing to Algoma’s reputation, and thoroughly objected to the lack of connection between the images and the reality of the Algoma culture. They asked instead, for something that portrays what they knew to be true of their school. It seems they didn’t want their school to be known as the place that stirred up family trouble.

And so it was that the complaints began pouring in to Paul about the Corinthian community that he had helped to nurture and raise, but now knew only from afar. Corinth was not a university town like Athens, but there were, nonetheless, reports reaching across the distance that said there are boys and girls behaving badly, theologically speaking. Naturally, Paul is more than concerned about what is happening in this church as it spreads its wings and pushes, somewhat stiff-armed and defiant, away from what and whom others believed to be true about a community of Christ-followers.

Perhaps the word back to Paul wasn’t so much like someone tattling, as it was inviting Paul to be a Facebook friend of a friend in the frat house. And there, unbeknownst to his now attentive audience, Paul has caught glimpses of the collective Corinthian page. He has seen the

writing on the wall. He has witnessed from the proximity of a magnified jpeg just what the community has been up to in his absence. Tables that are to gather them in as one are now trashed with the debris of fights over food. The floors and the communal footings are dangerously slippery with the spilled milk of the Gospel. Some, over there, are absorbed in not-so-civil table mannerisms, arguing about the best nourishment for growing spiritual minds: should it be theologically homogenized... that thicker, heavier, cream-like liquid that some say is too thick for them to stomach, and others say is a health hazard, processed too easily, too quickly, without enough deconstruction? Or should it be that fully-skimmed theology... fat-free to the extent that its critics call it blue, so watered down, it runs like water; thinned, they say, to the place where it seems to quench the thirst but has so stripped itself of substantive components that there's nothing to stick to the bones, or the heart. They are the quarrels of a community divided, tripping over itself to adhere to cliques of finite leadership.

Paul's response is quick and to the point, not bothering with subtleties. In this letter from home away from home, there isn't time to waste in redirecting their ways; in showing them that, in the process of aligning themselves with sides of finite leadership, they have not only separated from one another, but they have worked to separate themselves from God. Paul's rhetorical agenda is not to quell debate and discussion – these are the hallmarks of a healthy community... but not so are those debates that descend into schools of thought and practice that will not communicate with one another, and whose adamant desire to distance themselves from the other has now, it seems, pulled them farther from the One who is Holy and wholly Other.

Paul writes with a passion seemingly foreign to many of his recipients. His authorship has already become defined by strange Christian claims that bump up against temporal doubts

that seem to find easier resolution in human constructs. What then, might it be like, for him to send a letter home to us, in this church body, in this north country and its freedoms?

Perhaps it would be akin to the experience of another Paul: Paul Wadell, now Professor of Religious Studies at a college near none other than the celebrated and presumably celebrating community of Green Bay, Wisconsin. Quite apart from football affiliations, in an essay called “Teaching as a Ministry of Hope”, he recounts how, after many years of graduate school teaching in Chicago, he says he crossed ‘the Great Divide’ into “the strange new world of undergraduate teaching”, where he found himself and his belief that “nothing is more relevant than theology” sinking fast and deep “into a sea of blank, empty stares and not-so-subtle checks of watches”. This Paul says he was somehow bound, yet profoundly separate from a classroom of students who reminded him more of orphans left on his doorstep from some alien world – orphans whose distance and disinterest made him question whether his passion for theology is “bizarre”.<sup>1</sup>

Here in the midst of a school of theology, we might be inclined to console Paul (and Paul) and ourselves by saying, ‘that’s not how it is here’. We are, after all, gathered here by our collective bizarreness; by our collective passion for all things theological. But move beyond these walls or even rattle around within and, we know, we will soon encounter the stares, the watch-checking... for it is often, we must also know, the state of our communities, of Sunday morning existence, even among those gathered in the places called church.

And lest we let ourselves be fooled by the view from our self-elevated pulpits and the deceiving claims of binary opposition, of us vs. them, we also must know and claim our connection to the stark moments of disconnect, of distance – distance that is not easily reducible

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<sup>1</sup> Paul J. Wadell, "Teaching as a Ministry of Hope," in *The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher*, ed. L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 120.

to a question of those in church leadership holding theology that is farther along or lagging behind, but distance often linked to deep suspect that those of us in theological education –in divinity schools and Sunday schools, in classrooms and in pulpits<sup>2</sup> – there is suspicion, often with strong evidence, that we have fallen prey to the dogged pursuit of temporal doubts and, along the way, have too easily lost sight of those who long to take their place at the table but are more than reluctant to get caught in the cross-fire of theological food fights. Worse yet, as they watch us back away from each other to take longer, lobbed shots for wider impact, there are those who wonder if we are not, in the process, also separating ourselves from God.

In the rush to defend our collective selves, there may be inclination to cast blame, to deflect... yet, as Paul Wadell says in reflecting on his particular place, with wisdom for our own, “We won’t salvage hope by blaming students for all that is demoralizing... today. Truth is partner to hope and the truth is, these students are creatures of our own making”.<sup>3</sup> All of which means that, in the vocational quest to ‘re-make others’, we must first surrender ourselves to the holy possibility, the holy truth of needing to be re-made ourselves first.

For all the difficult truths that it names, Wadell’s experience is still one of profound hope and grace. He says as much, affirming that he does not regret crossing the Great Divide. Instead, he says, “it has been an adventure full of challenges, surprises, and occasional perils, but it has also been full of grace”<sup>4</sup> – and all because of his intentional choice to “probe the world of our students to wrestle with what makes so many of them strangers to us and we, most certainly, to them”.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell, eds., *The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), xii.

<sup>3</sup> Wadell, "Teaching as a Ministry of Hope," 120.

<sup>4</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, "Teaching as a Ministry of Hope," 134.

<sup>5</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, "Teaching as a Ministry of Hope," 121.

For it is there, in his and our intentional engagement with the other, even and especially with another who may find us bizarre – it is there that God opens us to a way of reconciliation, with one another and with God.

Just as St. Paul says to all of God's people, there is grace in the promise that any perils of close relationship with those who are different, any fears about clearly and explicitly naming the bizarre, but life-giving need for something, someone beyond humanity – these fears and finite allegiances have all been overshadowed by the light of the Paschal affirmation, proclaiming that the reach of God's forgiving grace and infinite mercy far exceeds any obstacles we may encounter or contrive on this lifelong journey home. St. Paul is adamant that no matter how far or how long any of us have wandered, no matter how much comfortable distance we have tried to put between ourselves and God, the cross of truth and its partner, the empty tomb of hope, have stayed and hovered as close as ever, brooding over you and I and all of creation, claiming us as God's beloved.

And so it is that these verses from Paul, St. Paul's letter home to Corinth, express themselves with language that is to the point... and yet not as pointed as we might assume him to be. He has never suffered fools gladly, but rather than wanting to embarrass the community, Paul writes and speaks with an underlying compassion that simply wants to point those with ears to listen back toward the Holy One that ought not to be missed – the great God of the universe whose grace and mercy are the true heart of all that is real and the only reality to which it is worth adhering one's life and one's growth.

Thinking back to Paul Wadell one more time, it is good to know that his essay is one of many gathered together in a text reflecting on the meaning and practice of "The Vocation of the

Theological Teacher”<sup>6</sup>. The official title of the book is *The Scope of Our Art*, borrowed from a phrase by St. Gregory – the 4<sup>th</sup> century Bishop known as the Doctor of Theologians. In Section 22 of his Orations, Gregory said, “But the scope (the aim) of our art is to provide the soul with wings, to rescue it from the world and give it to God, and to watch over that which is in His (sic) [God’s] image, if it abides, to take it by the hand, if it is in danger, or restore it, if ruined, to make Christ dwell in the heart, by the Spirit: and, in short, to deify, and bestow heavenly bliss upon, one who belongs to the heavenly host”.

All these years later, there may be places of chafe at some of Gregory’s language, but there is within it a fundamental humility that acknowledges and stands in awe of the unbreakable bond of our belonging to God – our God who daily lives out the divine, unshakable choice to be in relationship with each of us, in spite of all the growing pains of human pushback; our God whose grace and mercy are unfathomably unstoppable and unfailingly unconditional; our God whose love is incomparably intimate, and inclusively incarnate; our pre-existent God who will not be categorized as post-anything. More than any tall tale can tell, this is the eternal story of God, in Christ, whose interconnected love refuses to be estranged, but beats at the heart of our lives’, our churches’, our global reality, for the sake of a reality far beyond anything we might see now. It is the Love that waits, as patiently as necessary, in a reconciled haven with a Risen welcome that says, to each, “I’m so glad you’re home”. Thanks be to God! Amen.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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<sup>6</sup> Jones and Paulsell, eds., *The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher*.