

“Theology in a Blink”
 Proper 19B (September 16, 2018)
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>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put *our* hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen<<

In his book *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking*, Malcolm Gladwell tells a story about an art dealer named Gianfranco Becchina.¹ Becchina, writes Gladwell, “approached the J. Paul Getty Museum in California ... [with] a marble statue [that he said was] from the sixth century BC. [This supposedly ancient statue] was what is know as a kouros - a sculpture of a ... male youth standing with his left leg forward and his arms at his sides. There are only about two hundred [such statues] in existence,” writes Gladwell, “and most have been recovered badly damaged or in fragments from grave sites and archeological digs. But [the kouros that Becchina had] was almost perfectly preserved. It stood close to seven feet tall. It had a kind of light-colored glow that set it apart from other ancient works. It was an extraordinary find. Becchina’s asking price was just under \$10 million.

“The Getty moved cautiously.” The statue seemed consistent with other statues of its kind; and Becchina produced authentic-looking documents that detailed the kouros’ “recent history”: it had been in the private collection of a Swiss physician, who had acquired it from a [reputable] Greek art dealer.” But, the price was high, so the Getty took “the kouros on loan and began a thorough investigation.” Among those who examined the piece was a geologist from the University of California named Stanley Margolis, who “spent two days examining the surface of the statue with a high-resolution stereomicroscope,” and then removed a core sample and analyzed it “using an electron microscope, electron microprobe, mass spectrometry, X-ray diffraction, and X-ray fluorescence.” Margolis concluded that the statue seemed to be authentic. After all of this, the “Getty was satisfied,” writes Gladwell, and they purchased the kouros, and launched a big press release with a front-page story in *The New York Times*.

But there was a problem. Several art historians who looked at the kouros had a gut feeling that something was not right about it. When Italian art historian Federico Zeri visited the museum to see the kouros, he “found himself staring at the sculpture’s fingernails They seemed wrong to him.” Evelyn Harrison, an expert in Greek sculpture, also didn’t feel right about the kouros. A Getty curator took her to visit the statue, and when he “swished a cloth off the top of it,” she remembers having a “hunch, an instinctive sense that something was amiss.” When Thomas Hoving, “the former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York,” saw the kouros he made a mental note of the first word that went through his mind. ““It was “fresh”,” he said. “And ‘fresh’,” he went on, “[is] not the right reaction to have to a [more than] two-thousand-year-old statue.” And when Georgios Dontas, “head of the Archeological Society of Athens” “first laid eyes on [the statue], he said, he felt a wave of ‘intuitive repulsion’.” All of these experts had a gut sense - experienced in a blink - that the sculpture was a fraud. And, as it turned out, there were problems with the statue’s documentation - some of the paperwork had been forged; and the statue’s surface, which seemed to be ancient, may have been aged with potato mold from “a forger’s workshop in Rome.” On the Getty’s website, below a picture of the kouros, and next to the word “Date,”

¹ Following Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* (New York: Back Bay, 2005), 3-14.

it says, “[From] about 530 BC, or modern forgery.” It also says, “Neither art historians nor scientists have been able to completely resolve the issue of the ... kouros’ authenticity.”²

How is it possible, wonders Gladwell, that art historians could grasp in a blink - “in a single glance” - more about the essence of the kouros than a team at the Getty could over many months of analysis? Sometimes, says Gladwell, our snap judgments are more accurate than when we overthink something.

Blink gave me a different way of reading today’s gospel story from Mark. In today’s story, Jesus puts the disciples on the spot, seeking an answer from them in a *blink*, so to speak. “Who do people say that I am?” he asks. It’s an out-of-the-blue question that the disciples haven’t been prepped for. And they begin to muse, replying that some people see Jesus as a great prophet, like Elijah or one of the others - Isaiah or Jeremiah; others see Jesus as a charismatic preacher, like John the Baptist who baptized throngs of people. Jesus then interjects, staring at the disciples with that piercing gaze, and asks them: “But who do *you* say that I am?” In a blink, Peter blurts out, “you are the Messiah.” “You are the Christ.” It’s interesting to me that Jesus neither affirms nor denies what Peter says; and maybe that’s because Peter is only partially correct. His snap judgment is based on what he’s seen of Jesus to that point: the miracles, the manner of life, the charisma. But “Messiah” in Peter’s day was a political term: kings and swords and armies. Peter doesn’t yet know of the cross or the empty tomb - there’s still more of Jesus to be revealed; and so Peter’s snap judgment is met with a sharp reply. Jesus, writes Mark, “sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.”

It’s also interesting to me that in the entire sweep of Mark’s gospel - all sixteen chapters - Jesus never gives his disciples the security of *really* knowing who he is. He reveals himself slowly, mysteriously, not in declarative statements to them like “I am the son of God” or “I am the Messiah,” but in the patient unfolding of his words and deeds. In his example, we might say. And, let me press this point further: in Mark’s gospel the only ones who truly “get” Jesus are those who don’t believe in him. The demons recognize him throughout this gospel: “I know you are the holy one of God,” said one of them. Still others said to him, “You are the Son of God.” The Roman centurion standing at the foot of the cross - the officer presiding over his crucifixion - also recognized Jesus: “truly,” he declared, “this man was the Son of God.” The High Priest, questioning Jesus at his trial, asks, “are you the Christ, the Son of God?” And Jesus gives him a straightforward answer, “I am,” he said.

But the disciples are never graced with such certainty. Instead, they bumble and fumble throughout Mark’s story. They hear and see extraordinary things from this “tremendous figure,” as writer G. K. Chesterton once called Jesus. They see his healings and hear his teachings. But on the night of his trial, they all flee from him; one betrays him; and Peter denies ever knowing him. It’s not until the end of this gospel - at the empty tomb - that efforts are made to redeem the disciples. It’s almost as if Mark - in this many-layered story, and in today’s story - is trying to speak a truth about the life of faith: that this life - that being a follower of Jesus, being a disciple - is not primarily about doctrinal certainty (being able to state theological truth in a *blink*), but about a *lifestyle* that extends beyond the blink-of-the-moment. It’s a *way* of life, modeled on that of the Christ, who, after telling the disciples to keep quiet, goes on to explain that following him means taking up a cross and living so expansively in love that it’s like giving up your life in order to gain it. Or, as one

² See here: <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/10930/unknown-maker-kouros-greek-about-530-bc-or-modern-forgery/>

theologian from the early fifth century put it:³ “[A person] is a Christian who follows the way of Christ, who ... shows compassion to all, who ... helps the wretched, who succours the needy, who mourns with the mourners, who feels another’s pain [deeply], who is moved to tears by the tears of others ..., whose door is closed to no one”

When I read today’s story in Mark, I wonder how Jesus would have responded had Peter’s blink-of-an-answer been different. It might be an absurd thought exercise, but I wonder what Jesus would have said had Peter answered, say, with words from one of the great Christian creeds - those theological snapshots that froze Christian beliefs in a particular time and place in history? What might Jesus have said, I wonder, if Peter answered the “Who do *you* say that I am?” question not with the phrase “You are the Messiah,” but with words from the great Nicene Creed? Imagine if Peter had answered - in the words of that creed - you are “begotten of the Father,” “light of light,” “very God of very God.” Or, what would Jesus have said if Peter answered the “Who do *you* say that I am?” question with words from the great Chalcedonian Creed? You are “truly God and truly man”: two natures, “indivisible” and “inseparable.” Or, imagine for a moment, if Peter’s answer had been an honest to God statement of doubt like “I’m not sure who you are.” And since we’re speculating, imagine if Peter had answered the “Who do *you* say that I am?” question with the statement, “You are love in flesh.” My guess is that Jesus’ response would’ve been exactly the same, “sternly ordering them not to say anything more.” Because faith - the acorn faith growing in those first disciples, the acorn faith that would become the oak tree called “Christianity” - has always been about more than simply a series of “I believe” or “I don’t believe” statements. Christian faith is about a way of life - a *fides viva* as Protestant Reformer Martin Luther once called it: “a living faith,” a “vibrant faith,” a “faith in action,” a faith in the *way* of the cross (“taking up one’s cross,” as Jesus puts it) - a faith that puts others first before self, a faith that - to return again to that fifth century theologian - “shows compassion to all, helps the wretched, succours the needy, mourns with the mourners, feels another’s pain [deeply], is moved to tears by the tears of others, and doesn’t close a door on anyone.” Faith - living faith - is a dynamic thing, woven into the flesh and blood of daily life.

...Philosopher Peter Rollins tells a story that illustrates this kind of faith.⁴ “One day,” he writes, “a small group of disciples who had embraced the way of Jesus early in his ministry heard him preaching by the side of a dusty road. As they crowded round they heard Jesus say, ‘the law requires that you carry a pack for one mile, but I say carry it freely for two.’ The disciples were deeply impressed by these words, for at the time a Roman soldier had the legal right to demand that a citizen carry his pack for a mile as a service to the Empire. This teaching not only allowed the disciples to turn this oppressive law into an opportunity to demonstrate kingdom [of God] values, but also presented them with an opportunity to [sacrifice] in some small way for their faith. As it was common for soldiers to evoke this law, the small band of believers soon developed a reputation for their actions. Roman soldiers would often hope that the citizens they asked to carry their packs would be among these disciples, and often a small bond of friendship would develop between a soldier and these followers of the Way [of Jesus]. After a year had passed this custom had become so established in the group that it became a defining characteristic of their shared life. The leaders would frequently refer to the teaching of Jesus and emphasize the need to carry a pack of the Roman soldier for two miles as a sign of one’s faith and commitment to God. It so

³ Pelagius, *Life and Letters*; ed. B. R. Rees (Rochester: The Boydell Press, 1998), 124. There’s some debate about whether Pelagius ever said this, hence the ambiguous: “theologian from the early fifth century.”

⁴ Peter Rollins, *The Orthodox Heretic: And Other Impossible Tales* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2015), 43-44.

happened that Jesus heard about this community's work, and, on his way to Jerusalem, took time to visit them. The leaders eagerly gathered all the members of the group to hear what Jesus would say. Once everyone had gathered, Jesus addressed them: 'Dear brothers and sisters, you are faithful and honest, but I have come to you with a second message, for you failed to understand the first. Your law says that you must carry a pack for two miles. My law says, "carry it for three".'

...Maybe the point of a story like this is to say that sometimes, when it comes to matters of faith, our snap judgments made in a *blink*, are best seen as provisional. Because the way of Christ - the way of love - will always push us a bit further, ask a bit more of us, invite us to go a bit deeper - invite us to be more compassionate, offer more help to the wretched and comfort to the needy; feel more deeply the mourning of the mourners, shed more tears with those who weep, and open more doors to the outcasts. Jesus never promises that following his way will be free of challenges - he says it's like "taking up a cross." But he does promise, as he once said, that all who follow his way, "will find rest for their souls." Amen.