

## *The Antidote to Naïve Cynicism*

Micah 6: 6-8 and I Corinthians 13

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Rev. Tom VandeStadt

Congregational Church of Austin, UCC

What is the alternatives to naïve cynicism? An active response to what arises, a recognition that we often don't know what is going to happen ahead of time, and an acceptance that whatever takes place will usually be a mixture of blessings and curses that will unfold over considerable time. Such an attitude is bolstered by historical memory, by accounts of indirect consequences, unanticipated cataclysms and victories, and long timelines.

Rebecca Solnit, from *Call Them by their True Names*

Our world is complicated.

Through countless relationships, systems, networks, feedback loops, tipping points, narratives, and memes, through cycles of life and death, forces of destruction and reconstruction, it's constantly making itself and remaking itself.

Faced with nuance, ambiguity, uncertainty, unintended consequences, and contingency, we strive to make sense of it, and to figure out how to live within it, as parts of it, while it all continuously unfolds around us, and we within it.

“What does this mean, what does that mean?” we ask. “What does it all mean?”

“What should I do, what shouldn't I do, in this situation, in that situation?”

“Who am I, who have I been, who can I become?”

Questions like these drive some of us into the church, where we seek truthful and meaningful dialogue with others, guidance and support from others, in our effort to understand, our attempt to live responsible lives, holy lives even.

In her most recent book of essays, Rebecca Solnit describes how some people opt out of living responsible lives by adopting a perspective and an attitude she calls naïve cynicism, wherein naivety and cynicism permeate and reinforce one another.

Resistant to seeing the world's complexity and ambiguity, and analyzing the world with relentless either/or thinking, this perspective oversimplifies the world by reducing it to clear-cut binaries. This or that.

One such binary is right and wrong. Convinced of its clarity, this perspective claims certainty in its view of the world. It insists upon it. This is how it is, this is how people should live. It's as clear as day. I'm right. Any claim to the contrary is wrong.

Another binary is good and bad, and it often interweaves with right and wrong. Those who are good are right, those who are wrong are bad.

Another binary is what's inevitable and what's impossible. Solnit writes, naïve cynicism “pronounces with great certainty future inevitabilities, present impossibilities, and past failures.”

This is how things will be, there's no alternative.

You can't do that now, it's impossible.

We tried that once, it failed.

Another binary is perfect and imperfect, pure and impure. This perspective demands perfection and purity from its side of a binary. And absolute allegiance to the right side, the good side, the moral side, our side, in opposition to their side, the immoral side, the bad side, the wrong side.

But demanding perfection is naïve Solnit writes, because there's no such thing as perfection. And when this naïve insistence on upholding perfect binaries that one sees with such certainty combines with cynicism—an attitude that everyone is just in it for themselves, a distrust of public institutions, a disdain for civic engagement, and a feeling that nothing I do makes a difference anyhow—this naïve cynicism immobilizes people.

They relinquish their responsibility. They drop out, sit on the sidelines, complain.

Solnit writes, naïve cynicism “reduces the motivation to participate in public life, public discourse, and even intelligent conversation that distinguishes shades of gray, ambiguities and ambivalences, uncertainties, unknowns, and possibilities.”

“Naïve cynics shoot down possibilities...cynics are often disappointed idealists and upholders of unrealistic standards. They are uncomfortable with victories, because victories are almost always temporary, incomplete, and compromised—but also because the openness of hope is dangerous.”

By making the perfect the enemy of the good, naïve cynicism gives up on even trying to achieve the good, and criticizes those who are trying for not doing it perfectly or achieving perfection.

When reflecting on this, I find I have to take care not to fall into the trap of a naïve binary myself, an either/or way of thinking—I'm either a naïve cynic, or I'm not. Yes, or no. No shades of gray, no ambiguity.

It's more helpful, less naïve, to ask myself, to what extent do I embody traits of naïve cynicism?

To what extent am I naïve, or in what areas of my life do I naïvely claim a clarity and a certainty that's unfounded, seek a perfection or a purity that's unrealistic, or see the world, other people, and myself in either/or terms?

To what extent am I cynical—jaded and distrustful of other people, of systems and institutions, thinking civic engagement is boring and meaningless, or that trying to change the world is pointless?

To what extent, through naivety and cynicism, do I drop out, become less responsible?

I confess my own degree of naivety and cynicism. I choose not to think of myself as a naïve cynic, but I also know I'm not free of those traits. I'm not free of irresponsible living.

It helps to be aware, and on the lookout, for when these traits arise, and why, and how they reduce my motivation to participate in life, how they pull me closer to the sidelines, move me to complain more, and live less responsibly.

I confess my susceptibility to bouts of naïve cynicism and irresponsibility.

It's also helpful to know the alternatives to naïve cynicism, the antidotes to naïve cynicism, so we can consciously practice cultivating these traits in our lives.

The alternatives include recognizing and accepting the world's complexity, ambiguity, and contingency.

Acknowledging the human limits to achieving clarity and certainty in our knowledge, and accepting a degree of confusion and uncertainty. Yes, we seek to be as clear and certain as we can be, yet without claiming a God's-eye view of reality, always recognizing our perspective is exactly that, a perspective.

Giving up perfection when acting on our values, yet never relinquishing the effort to achieve the best we possibly can at this time, through compromise if necessary, even through trying and failing.

Recognizing and accepting that the work we're doing now, the life we're living now, is part of a long-term project, one that preceded us, one that will continue after we're gone.

So let us guide one another, and support one another, in cultivating the traits that lead to responsible living, a holy life.

Let us guide one another, support one another, in cultivating humility in our clarity and certainty.

Humility infused with fierce love. Fierce love that moves us to expend the effort to achieve the best we possibly can in fulfilling justice on this earth.

Humility and fierce love infused with kindness. Kindness for every person who's trying to negotiate all of this complexity in their lives.

Humility, fierce love, and kindness infused with hope—hope that the work we do today, the lives we live today, will benefit more than burden those who come after us, when they pick up where we leave off with whatever we hand them.