

THE FOOLISHNESS OF PREACHING CHRIST

Summerlea U.C.
Rev. Scott A. Patton
March 7, 2021

1 Corinthians 1:18–25
John 2:13–22
The 3rd Sunday in Lent

Prayer

Loving God, speak to us in this time of worship with the words that you would have us hear, and open our hearts and our minds to receive all that you offer to us this day.
And now, may the words of my mouth... Amen.

Several years ago, I heard a story that has stayed with me, mostly because it is difficult to understand. It is a true story, about a woman whose life was coming apart at the seams. When one of her friends told her about a silent retreat at a nearby convent, she decided to give it a try. She had never done anything like that before.

Once she arrived, she received her room assignment and was standing in the elevator with her suitcase in her hand when a short, plump nun stepped inside the elevator with her. The woman pressed the button for the fourth floor. The nun pressed the button for the third floor. Then the nun turned and said, “What brings you to us, my dear?” and the woman explained her situation. “My mother has just died, I think my father is an alcoholic, my marriage is falling part, and I feel like I am going crazy.” Before she could say any more, the elevator went “ding” and the doors opened. The nun gave the woman a funny little smile. “God must love you very much”, she said, and disappeared through the closing doors. “God must love you very much”? What does that mean?!

We don’t tend to think of a string of catastrophes as a sign of God’s love, but the nun was clearly making some kind of connection. Short of asking the nun herself what she meant, I will probably never know what that connection is, but I tell you the story because Paul in his letter to the Corinthians seems to know about it too, and offers his own comments, which seem very confusing. All this talk about foolishness and wisdom, and stumbling blocks and weakness, it all seems as clear as mud. Well, let me try to make it as clear as water.

The context is important. As best as anyone can tell, Paul arrived in Corinth around 50 C.E. – about 20 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Over the next year and a half, he founded a church there. Once he was satisfied that the community was strong enough to survive without him, he set sail for Ephesus to go do the same thing all over again there. He stayed in touch with the Corinthians by mail, doing his best to instruct them long distance, but it was not long before trouble set in.

When we read Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, we are reading the letter that was addressed to this small mission church. It is believed that the church may have consisted of about 100 people¹. It had a few Jewish Christians, but most of the community were Gentile converts. At this time, they had no church building, and so they met in private homes. That meant the size of the gatherings was limited by the size of the villas of some of the more affluent members of the community.

They probably had three or four house churches which seemed to go in different directions, which contributed to the problems. Also, the faith community was made up of people from a wide spectrum of social and economic classes, ranging from slaves to very wealthy householders. This diversity is unusual for any voluntary group either in the ancient world or today and, as you would expect, it only added to the tensions and difficulties.

Now, I have said this before, but it bears repeating. Paul always wrote his letters to address a particular problem, in a particular situation, in a particular place. Paul never wrote general letters to “the Church”, although we tend to treat them that way.

¹ This background information was gleaned from *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching – First Corinthians* by Richard B. Hayes (John Knox Press, 1997) pp. 1-14

So, here we have the letter, and the place is Corinth, a prosperous Greek city under the control of the Roman Emperor. Corinth was a seaport, so it had a lot of people coming and going. It had a reputation for being a wild partying town, and it had numerous sites for pagan worship with many magnificent statues of gods and goddesses in public places.

The situation is the life and work of the small mission congregation, and the problem is conflict and dissension within the community.

Some people seemed to be boasting about their faith, others debated the meaning of the cross, claiming that they already had all the spiritual benefits of the resurrection, and there were a number of issues related to legal matters, marriage, the Lord's Supper, eating meat offered to idols, and spiritual gifts.

It seems that the Corinthians had written to Paul with a series of questions and problems. We do not have their correspondence, we only have the reply, so we have to read between the lines to understand what was the original question or issue to which Paul is responding.

So, in today's reading we get only a snippet of Paul's response to the Corinthians. We do, however, get a well-known passage from Paul's writings, and it is, in fact, one of my favourites: "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

Now, the term "wisdom" in the Corinthian setting refers to both the possession of knowledge AND to the ability to express that knowledge as a powerful, polished speaker. In Greek culture, the great eloquent speakers were like movie stars or rock stars or sports heroes of today – they were admired, emulated and always had a crowd gathered around them.

It seems from reading this letter that part of the controversy was stirred up by the tendency of the new Christians to view Paul as simply another public speaker competing for attention and approval along-side other popular philosophers.

Paul admits he was not a great speaker; he was short, insecure, and tactless; he was always rubbing people the wrong way.

The opposition to Paul suggested that God had better taste than that. Surely God would choose someone more eloquent – someone more like them – to serve as a true apostle.

But Paul argues for a conversion of the imagination. He says that yes, God has turned everything upside down. What we count as important, God counts as expendable; what we see as wisdom, God sees as foolishness; what we see as strong, God sees as weak. And God is using the weakness of Paul to proclaim the powerful story of God's love.

You see, we have grown up with the Christian story, so it seems tame and comfortable to us in many ways. Looking back at the Gospel story from a distance of more than 2000 years, it is hard to imagine the utter shame of death by crucifixion. But for the first believers, the Christian story was a scandal. Imagine Paul standing in the Jewish synagogue and saying, "We worship Jesus, who was arrested as a common criminal, found guilty and died by the most gruesome form of capital punishment imaginable, nailed to a cross. This is the one to whom we have devoted our lives. Through God's power, he was raised to life again and is now with God to sustain and guide us". Imagine the reaction of the crowd to that story.

People would wonder, if Jesus was God, why did he not save himself? Why plunge headlong into self-destruction, when a little change in plans could have had a different outcome? He could easily have avoided the cross, and have spent many more years teaching and preaching and healing and bringing good to the world, until he died of old age.

Perhaps now you are beginning to see the problem. It is foolishness to preach Christ crucified, if you measure it by human wisdom, by human standards. However, God does indeed work in mysterious ways. It is not without reason that we continue to use that well-worn phrase. God's way is not our way. And so, Paul is trying to explain the foolishness of the cross.

This is Paul's theology of the cross. Paul is saying that the people of his time will not get the answers they seek. The expectations of the world are not the expectations of God. What we, as Christians, have to offer instead is the story of Jesus.

To believe that story is to gain the eyes of faith, which see things differently.

Paul is saying that to those with the eyes of faith, the cross demonstrates the supreme love of God for us. God's love is shown through the cross because, despite all that humanity did to Jesus, he continued to love and forgive and support and strengthen and guide human beings. Jesus - God in human form – faced all that humanity threw at him and did not flinch, did not waver, did not seek revenge.

The message of preaching about the crucified Lord is the height of absurdity to the world, to those who can think only in worldly terms.

However, those with eyes of faith recognize the cross for what it is, the power of God, and this changes the way we understand everything else as well. This is why we need a conversion of the imagination. Everything is turned on its head. This is why all throughout history, some parts of the church have stood outside the corridors of power and tried to raise a prophetic voice.

The Christian faith is counter-cultural. Just as Jesus was "in the world", but not "of the world", so Christian faith stands apart from our cultural norms, and sometimes even stands in opposition to them.

Sometimes we may feel overwhelmed by the world or by worldly powers. At times, we might feel like offering the prayer of the Cape Breton fishermen who say "O God, help me, the sea is so great and my boat is so small".

Reinhold Neibuhr is a German Christian who lived through the second world war as a part of the Confessing Church in opposition to Hitler. He wrote a prayer that is called *The Serenity Prayer* and I am sure most of you know the first two lines of it, but have you heard the whole prayer? It goes like this:

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things
I cannot change,
Courage to change the
things I can, and the
wisdom to know the difference.

That's the part many of us know, but the prayer goes on:

Living one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time;
accepting hardship as the
pathway to peace.
Taking as Jesus did, this
sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it.
Trusting that He will make
all things right if I
surrender to His will;
That I may be reasonably happy
in this life, and supremely
happy with Him forever in the next. Amen²

I am still not sure what that nun was trying to tell the woman in the elevator, but I think it had to do with everything that woman was about to find out – that in the midst of her losses, with pieces of the sky still falling

² Reinhold Neibuhr, 1926

all around her, she was about to discover in Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. It is the power that enables each of us to walk our own path to the foot of the cross in Jerusalem.

It is the wisdom that challenges our assumptions, and looking back over all the awful and wonderful things that have happened to us, enables us to say "God must love us very much."

Thanks be to God. Amen.