

“Lent: A Time to Proclaim Christ Crucified”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 15, 2009

Third Sunday of Lent
Rev. John Wahl

Exodus 20:1-17
I Corinthians 1:18-31

Speaking of folly, on one of their concert albums, members of the foolishly named band – *The Bare Naked Ladies* – tell the story of walking through the streets one day in an unfamiliar city, when a woman stops them to ask: “can you point me to the Bryant Street Theater?”

Being from out of town, the band members apologize and plead ignorance, which makes them all the more surprised to hear the lady respond: “Aw, for Christ’s sake!”

Part-humored, part-saddened by this exchange, the band-mates imagine a time back when they were kids and used to spend summer days together up in a tree house and used to encounter strange grown-ups like this woman. Dreaming up the same scenario in the neighborhood of their youth, the response to her question might have been, “the Bryant Street Theater, yeah, it’s right up that ladder. Welcome to the Bryant Street Theater, have a fruit roll-up. (Pause) Aren’t you gonna eat it? Aw, for Christ’s sake!”

Funny to imagine, but a little sad, too. In both situations, walking unfamiliar streets and in unfamiliar surroundings, there is, first, the sense of dislocation and then, of foolishness. A woman yells at you because you don’t know your way around a strange city – that’s both folly and gloomy. A woman who has been misguided, sent up into a treehouse, and yelled at by kids because she won’t take a bite of plasticized fruit – that’s foolishness in every sense of the word.

Hear again Paul’s words to the people of Corinth – the Christians of Corinth – which, Paul knows, will not be heard the same way by everyone in his midst: for some they are folly, for others, they are the key to life. He says, “Since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.” (v. 21)

Corinth was a city where the elites prided themselves on their wisdom and on their ability to orate and argue effectively. Like contemporary celebrities, many of these performers were here-today and gone-tomorrow. The rise to stardom was often followed quickly by a steep decline. Paul was opposed to the idea of performance for its own sake; to an orator’s show that manipulates its hearers. The gospel is more enduring – it is once and for all, the same story of death and resurrection for all of time, for all of humanity.¹

Paul says that talking about the cross, proclaiming a crucified Savior, is pure folly. Why is the word *cross*, and the word about the cross, so offensive to both Jews and to Greeks? Well, for one thing, there was no worse way to die. It was a form of capital punishment reserved for barbarians and rebellious Jews and the worst of all the criminals. Not only was there extreme

¹ Ian Markham in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 2

physical pain, but also humiliation of hanging up there naked for all to see and mock. It was a punishment saved for extreme circumstances, to prove its point.

Kierkegaard wrote: “Christianity has taken a giant stride into the absurd. Take away from Christianity its ability to shock and it’s altogether destroyed. It then becomes a tiny, superficial thing, capable neither of inflicting deep wounds nor of healing them.”²

Here comes then carpenter’s son, riding on the back of a donkey. Here is a messiah that doesn’t make sense. Only the very young, the very old, the women and the simple-folk see him. They are standing in the right place to get a proper view. Along with the poor, the maimed, the blind, the lame, the prisoners, the poor and the crazed, these “fools” see things as they really are. As for the smart ones, they know better than to stand there and watch such a parade. They know that if they work hard, achieve, and act sensibly, they would be in the know, they would be wise. Of course, it all depends on the way you look at it.

Imagine you were driving by a building that had a hangman’s noose on top of a steeple, or a gun on the sign, or an electric chair standing in the front lawn. If you were Jew or a Greek or a modern-day equal, would you want to stop there and worship?

Yet, Paul says that God in Jesus Christ is powerful and wise in those places we call weak and foolish. God is revealed in the place we would least expect to find God – at a junk heap outside the city, naked and bleeding on a cross. And he says it is revealed to us not in seeing it with our own eyes, but in hearing it proclaimed, by listening to the story – the gospel story – over and over again. God chose what is weak and foolish and despised in the eyes of the world – God chose Christ crucified – and that makes it difficult for many to believe.

Look at many churches today – especially newer churches – and you will notice that the cross is hardly present. It is no longer found on steeples, or inside sanctuaries, or on the cover of Bibles and hymnals (if there are any). Because the cross can be difficult to explain in the context of our culture, which praises power over weakness, wisdom and not foolishness, popularity and fame instead of humility and meekness – the cross is hidden. And yet we put in out on our front lawn – not one but three – to emphasize that Christ may not have been the only one crucified but the only one – ourselves included – with the power to conquer death.

Look at many churches today and you will also find that there is not proclamation of the gospel. You may find a cool multi-media display, there may be a soothing assortment of candles upon which to meditate, you may be entertained by a rock band, an orchestra or a well-polished public speaker, but there is no proclamation – no-one standing up to say and then to show with their lives that the cross matters to them; they already have everything they could ever need.

And finally, look at many churches and you might hear preaching and teaching about Jesus, but not about the cross. You may be taught the seven steps toward inner harmony or the five keys to receiving God’s blessings (code word: money). Learning ways to help yourself can be and is an important part of the Christian message, but not as important as what Paul says here to the people of Corinth, and to us as well. If we boast, it is not in ourselves, or how well we

² As quoted by William Willimon, “Looking Like Fools”

have acquired assets or made ourselves to look or packaged our message, but in God. Christ, our Lord and Savior, died a horrific death because those around him who were powerful – both Jew and Gentile – thought that by killing him, silencing him, they could preserve their own power. Their plan, by the world’s standards, seemed wise and logical, but to us, it does not compare to the wisdom and power we find in Christ.

The cross tells us to be attentive to those things in life that challenge our sense of self-sufficiency and security. The cross wakes us up to those offending and disruptive messages we receive; those painful moments when our once secure world is torn apart and what we thought was something strong and reassuring is reduced to nothing. In those moments, what is the word of the cross? In what way might you – like Jesus did – commend your spirit to the Father, put your life in the hands of the one who can really uphold and protect you?

In the liturgical tradition of the Byzantine church, the third Sunday of Lent is devoted to the Adoration of the Holy Cross. After the prayers of the Lord’s Supper are presented, while the people sing the hymn: “Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One,” a tray of flowers and basil is brought out and a cross is placed in the center. The cross, the symbol of a foul and ugly death, is adorned to become beautiful and sweet-smelling.³

In its Hebrew roots, the word salvation means “making room” or “providing space.” When Paul claims salvation for those who believe the gospel story, he is offering the Christians in Corinth and Christians today a broader, freer and more loving life now. Day by day, we are being saved as a people from cramped lives of selfishness and worry for the broad and roomy discipleship of the cross.⁴

Sadly, foolishly, but not surprisingly, this is a true story. It was a bit of a shock that he had been fired. The word was that he led one of the best youth programs in town. But, after a while the leaders had determined that he was too immature, too unwise, too impetuous to work with the kids (no wonder they loved him) and so he had been fired.

He went back to one of his professors and confessed, “I’ll admit, I tend to overdo things. And I am young and don’t always check with the other church leaders first. I probably shouldn’t have done that program at the retreat on *The Devil Takes Visa* or another called *Rush Limbaugh is a Big Fat Liar*. It’s just that the gospel is so radical and I want the kids to be able to see it. I’ll admit it, I’ve been a fool,” the remorseful youth pastor said.

“Yeah,” his mentor replied, “maybe you have been a fool...for Christ’s sake.”⁵ AMEN.

Paul said to the Galatians: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now lives in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 2:19-20)

³ Stanley Harakas, “Journey to the Cross”

⁴ Jeff Paschal in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 2

⁵ William Willimon, “A Fool for Christ”