

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
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"We Preach Christ Crucified"

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 (NRSV)

[18] For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

[19] For it is written,

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

[20] Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? [21] For 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.

[22] For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, [23] but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, [24] but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. [25] For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

MISUNDERSTOOD

A young pastor asked an experienced pastor what he had learned about preaching after almost 40 years in the field. The old pastor thought for a while and then replied,

“The possibilities for being misunderstood are virtually limitless!”

Nowhere is this truer than in our lesson for today. Paul wrote, “We preach Christ crucified.”

With a message like that the possibilities for misunderstanding are virtually limitless. And, from the very beginning, the message was misunderstood.

A STUMBLING BLOCK FOR THE JEWS

According to Paul, many Jews stumbled over this message. We shouldn't be surprised.

These past few weeks we've been talking about how even Jesus' own disciples stumbled over this message. Last week we noted that when Jesus started talking about suffering and death as a part of God's plan for the Messiah, Peter rebuked him. He grabbed him by the robe and tried to shake some sense into him.

The Jews had scriptural support for their rejection of Jesus. Their law said, “He that is hanged on a tree is accursed of God.” (Deuteronomy 21:23) So, for many Jews the message of the cross did not prove that Jesus was the Messiah. It disproved it once and for all.

We know all about Isaiah 53 and those Old Testament passages that suggest that the Messiah would be a suffering servant. But, this was not the common way of thinking about the Messiah in those days. The Messiah would not be a suffering servant. The Messiah would be the one who would take away pain and suffering. The Messiah would lead a political and religious golden age.

The Jews weren't looking for a cross. According to our Scripture for today they were looking for signs. (1 Corinthians 1:22)

Now last week we noted that Jesus did perform many signs and wonders. He miraculously fed thousands, healed the sick and on some occasions even raised the dead. In just a few weeks on Palm Sunday the crowds will proclaim Jesus Messiah as he enters Jerusalem.

But, the cheers stopped when Jesus was required to take up a cross. As discouraged disciples would later put it on the road to Emmaus, “We had hoped that Jesus was the Messiah. But, now it has been three long days after he has died, and all is lost.” (Luke 24:21)

It took many post resurrection appearances of the risen Christ and the powerful coming of God's Spirit to convince discouraged disciples that the cross was not the final defeat but the beginning of a new creation.

THE CROSS AND THE VIDEO SCREEN

No wonder many Jews rejected this message. In fact there are many Christians who reject this message even today. The cross has been replaced by the video screen as the central focus in many churches.

Last week at Presbytery our keynote speaker suggested that words alone won't do the job any more. That's old school.

If we are to be successful we will have to regale our audience with more than words. We will have to engage them with powerful worship experiences that use a variety of media. He said that the gospel message does not change, but our method of presenting the gospel needs to change.

The speaker at Presbytery was engaging and effective in his presentation. But, on some level I still wonder if it wouldn't be better to just give a straightforward presentation of the gospel. I believe that how we present the message affects the message. Sometimes, “the medium is the message.”

We cannot make the cross and the message of the gospel into something that is easily accepted. According to Paul there is always something scandalous about the gospel.

Paul wrote, “We preach Christ crucified.” I don’t know how you can dress that up with fancy video presentations and upbeat songs. It remains a stumbling block not only for the Jews but for us as well.

The Apostle Paul seems to have thought that simplicity in preaching the gospel was to be desired. He wrote in the second chapter of this same letter to the Corinthians,

“And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 2:1-2)

Instead of making it easier for his audience to accept Jesus, Paul seemed to make it harder, stripping the message down to the sacrifice of the cross. For Paul it was all about body broken and blood shed.

So many Jews rejected the message of the cross because this sign of defeat and despair didn’t fit into their idea of the Messiah.

A FOOLISH MESSAGE

On the other hand, the Greeks rejected the message of the cross because it seemed foolish. It seemed crazy ... like strawberry pizza!

The Greeks believed that God was above the human struggle. God was the ideal. Material reality, this world was a pale reflection of that perfect reality.

And so the idea that the Son of God would humble himself by becoming a human being and dying on a cross for sinners was the height of nonsense. The message of Christ crucified was just stupid to the Greeks. It didn’t fit in with their preconceived ideas about God.

The Bible tells us that the Greeks were looking for wisdom. In a sense the Greeks viewed wisdom as a kind of God. And their method of looking for wisdom was through debate and fancy speech.

Some of the ancient Greeks were such good speakers that people would drop everything and come to hear these famous orators. The senate would close for the day and people would actually leave the games to hear a famous speaker.

Can you imagine a speaker who is so good that people would actually leave a football game to hear him?

ELEVATING THE MENTAL HIKE

But, presenting an idea in a convincing fashion does not make it true. Indeed, the chicanery of these early Greek orators led to our word sophist.

Commentator William Barclay wrote that originally the word “sophist” meant a wise man in the good sense.

But, it came to mean “a mental acrobat, a man who with ... persuasive rhetoric could make the worse appear the better reason. It meant a man who could spend endless hours discussing hair-splitting trifles, a man who had no real interest in solutions but who simply gloried in the ‘mental hike.’”

Sometimes I think that we also become too interested in the mental hike. We elevate human wisdom and achievement.

But, the cross has a way of negating all that.

HERE AND NOW

We believe that on the cross the world crucified the Son of God. On the cross we took the word made flesh and killed him in the worst way possible. It is not just about what those people did back then. It is about who we are here and now.

The anthem that the choir sung (will sing) puts it well. “It was I who should have died; it was I who should have been crucified.”

Our words of wisdom seem foolish at the foot of the cross. At the foot of the cross we see that things are not what they seem.

The message of the cross confronts us with our own sinfulness.

The message of the cross reminds us that we too deny what we believe in most deeply and run away at the first sign of danger. The message of the cross reminds us that even good religious people can do the worst thing possible in the name of God.

A DIVIDED CHURCH

There is a reason Paul was so insistent on preaching Christ crucified in this particular church. It was because the church at Corinth was deeply divided.

If the church at Corinth had been a Presbyterian Church we would have sent in an Administrative Commission with the power of original jurisdiction ... that is we would have given our representatives the power to take control of the church because things were so messed up!

The church was deeply divided over leadership. Some followed a man named Apollos. Some followed Cephas. Some followed Paul. And some said, "I'm the real Christian. I'm above this argument. I follow Jesus."

They valued clever speech instead of sound doctrine. Many of the Christians at Corinth thought that they were a cut above the rest. They thought that they knew the "deep secrets" of the faith that no one else knew. They were sure that they had more spiritual gifts than any other church in town.

To this divided, group of self-assured know it alls, Paul said, "Look to the cross." Things aren't what they seem. Sin has invaded your life and your fellowship.

When you look at the body broken and the blood shed on your behalf on the cross of Calvary, how can you be so arrogant and high handed in your dealings with others? You may think you are smart, but the cross says otherwise.

A LOOK AT OUR MORTALITY

The cross helps us see our moral failures more clearly. But, the cross not only makes us consider our own sinfulness; it also makes us consider our own mortality.

One reason that we have a hard time looking at the cross is that it reminds us of the fragility of life. The cross will not let us be content with silly diversions and fancy words.

When we look to the cross we are forced to ask, "What is most important in my life? What can I hold on to when everything else is taken away?"

Fred Craddock tells about one of his schoolmates who spent many years ministering in China. He was under house arrest and the soldiers came one day and told him that he could return to America. The family was celebrating.

The soldiers said, "You can take 200 pounds with you."
They had been there for years! Two hundred pounds!

They got the scales and they started the family arguments-two children, wife, and husband. Must have this vase...Well, this is a new typewriter...What about my books? ...What about our toys? They weighed everything and took it off, weighed it and took it off, until at last they had it right on the dot: two hundred pounds.

The soldiers asked if they were ready to go and they said, "Yes." "Did you weigh everything?" They said, "Yes!" "Did you weigh the kids?" "No, we did not." "You will have to weigh the kids."

In the blink of an eye, typewriter, vase, books, all became trash.

What treasures that we own might quickly become trash in the face of our own mortality?
 What treasures might we quickly throw away at the foot of the cross?

In the face of our own mortality human wisdom and achievement look foolish. What hope do we have? Paul suggests that we look to the cross.

COMMENTARY BY THE PREACHER

I think that one of the best commentaries on this passage is the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. The preacher in that book is on a search for wisdom. And he tries everything.

He works hard and makes a lot of money, but then he thinks, “What’s the use of working so hard and saving all this money? It will all go to my children who will waste it. This is foolish”

So, the preacher tries the pleasure principle. He tells himself that there is no problem so big that a good glass of wine can’t handle!

But, that didn’t work either. He wrote,

“All man’s efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied.”

Apparently life’s wisdom (contrary to what many of us believe) is not to be found on the food channel! If we make things that bring us pleasure the number one thing in our lives, then ironically they cease to be pleasurable.

Finally, the preacher tried education. Surely this will bring true wisdom. Isn’t that what we tell our children? “If you have your education, that’s something that no one can take away from you.”

Far be it from me to downplay the importance of education, but education as an ultimate answer leaves a lot to be desired. The preacher of Ecclesiastes put it in a way that every college student can understand well. “Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.”

That statement is truer now than when it was first written. And besides as we get older I keep hearing the words of my father, “I’ve forgotten more about that than you will ever know.”

As we get older that hard won wisdom slips away!

Human wisdom in any form does not last. In the light of our own mortality it is obvious that we need to find an answer that is greater than human wisdom. We need a wisdom that will last and take into account the frailty of human nature.

Paul tells us, “Look to the cross.”

AN UNUSUAL CROSS

At Bible study this week someone told us about a cross that a minister used in a children’s sermon.

The minister used to be a chaplain in the army, and he had a unique cross since he ministered to both Roman Catholic and Protestant soldiers. The “Roman Catholic” side of his cross was a crucifix that displayed the agony of Christ on the cross. And the “Protestant” side of the cross was empty, to emphasize the resurrection.

Our lesson for today suggests that perhaps both the Roman Catholics and the Protestants are right on this.

If we preach Christ crucified, we certainly must look realistically at the agony of the cross. The cross is not a piece of jewelry. The cross is a terrible way to die. The cross points to our own sinfulness. The cross points to our own mortality.

On the other hand the Protestants are right as well. Some crosses need to be empty to emphasize the resurrection that comes. Even in the season of Lent there is a hint of resurrection.

Every time Jesus predicts his passion in the gospels, he not only talks about rejection, suffering and death. He also alludes to that third day of resurrection. That day may seem cloudy and far away, but the promise of that day is always there.

We gaze at the empty cross ... a reminder that God’s hope does not end at death’s door.

In fact we often see God’s salvation most clearly when we are broken and long for a better day. In our moments of despair we can often see the glory of the cross.

COMING OUT OF THE STANDS

The Olympics are filled with triumphs and tragedies. Most of the time there is a clear distinction between the two. But, one year that distinction was not so clear in the 400 meter race.

At the start of the race Englishman, Derek Redmond popped his right hamstring.

Most runners would merely quit when experiencing such terrible pain. But, Derek wanted to compete in the Olympics so badly that he kept going ... hopping his way toward the finish line.

All the other runners finished the race in seconds. But, Redmond, in tears slowly and laboriously kept hopping. He looked as if he would fall at any moment.

Suddenly a man appeared beside Derek. His father had run down from the stands and pushed his way through the security guards to reach his son.

Redmond's father put his arm around his son and let him cry on his shoulder for a second.

Then, with his father holding him up, Derek hobbled to the finish line and finished the race.

I think that what happened that day can be seen as a kind of parable of how the cross brings us salvation. We do not cross the finish line because of our wisdom or our good works or our abilities.

In the final analysis we are saved because we have a Heavenly Father who through his Son, Jesus was willing to come out of the stands and carry us over the finish line.

Only those who have been carried over the finish line really know the power of the cross.

Only those who understand the depth of their sin and the awful price that Christ paid for us on Calvary can begin to appreciate the wisdom and the power of the cross.

The old hymn puts it well.

“When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of glory died.

My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.

Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

Amen.