

The Foolishness of the Gospel CHC 10-15-17

Jeremiah 9:23-24

1 Corinthians 1:18-25; 2:1-5

A man sits alone. The room is empty. Sitting behind his empty desk he stares at a clock which hangs on the wall in front of him. He is waiting for the hands on the time keeper to rest at twelve and five. Once they do, he gets up out of his chair. Looking around the room one last time he walks out the door. He is now on the way to his retirement party.

This is a scene from the movie, "About Schmidt", starring Jack Nicholson. He plays the character, Warren Schmidt, on the brink of retirement. Reflecting upon his life, Warren asks, "I know we're all pretty small in the big scheme of things, and I suppose the most you can hope for is to make some kind of difference, but what kind of difference have I made? What in the world is better because of me?"

This morning a multitude of thoughts are going through my mind. What do I say? Do I lay down a challenge, offering my wisdom on the nature of things at hand and what I think that you need to do? I've done that before in my departure from four other congregations. I'm not sure it changed anything. A church will do what it is going to do. You have your patterns set, many good ones I might add.

You have just listened to two of my favorite texts grounding me throughout forty plus years of ordained ministry. Jeremiah reminds us that the common goals we are so inclined to embrace in this world are nothing compared to the knowledge and ways of God. Worldly wisdom, power, and wealth are mighty seducers from our pursuit of God and what God values most. The devil tempted Jesus to exploit these values as a way to accomplish the ministry goals that God had given him. God takes us a different route.

Paul enters through a similar portal. He observes that the working values and ways of God stand in opposition to the world's wisdom. A cross as a symbol of God's revelation and power mocks human wisdom. "God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not to reduce to nothing the things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God" (1 Corinthians 1:28).

C.S. Lewis writes that, "We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade, the presence of God. The world is crowded with God. God walks everywhere incognito. And the incognito is not always hard to penetrate. The real labor is to remember, to attend. In fact, to come awake. Still more, to remain awake" ("Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer", Homiletics, Sept.-Oct. 2017, p.67).

Through Jesus Christ and the cross God enters our world incognito. Paul proclaims that his ministry is built not upon human wisdom and learning, but expounding the foolishness of Jesus Christ and the cross. Our real work is to come awake to God's way of being and doing. Attend to that, pay attention, stay mindful and awake to the manner of God's working and way of communication.

I remember the first day I began ministry and preached my first sermon as an ordained pastor of twenty six years. I identified with the emotions Paul describes, "And I came to you in weakness and fear and in much trembling".

The first text that I preached from was verse 2 of chapter 2; “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified”. Today, as I preach this one last time as a called pastor, I come back to this verse. How have I come to understand what it means to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified among the people and churches that I have served over forty three years?

The cross opens us up to the heart and mind of God. “God was in Christ”, not up there looking down. Knowing only Christ and him crucified draws us into God’s identification with the suffering of people all around us (2Corinthians 5:16-21). “In the alchemy of redemption, that most villainous crime becomes our healing strength” (Yancey, ‘Grace Notes’, p.1040). It is about thee, not me.

The cross trumps and transcends human wisdom. “Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world?” A criminal’s cross is not something I gravitate toward for wisdom. Jesus words, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” is an invitation to take a different path from what the world calls wisdom (Matthew 16:24).

It was eight years into ministry. I was pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Bellingham, Washington. People were asking me what my plans were for growing the church. They wanted to be successful, success measured by attendance, membership, and money. I wanted to achieve those goals as well. Dallas Willard calls them the ABC’s of ministry, Attendance-Buildings-and Cash. I felt a tension between these goals and Jesus’ words. Then a profound thought entered my mind. I could succeed at being a pastor by orienting all that I did toward the ABC’s. However, I could lose my soul. “For what will it profit to gain the whole world but lose your soul?” Jesus asked. The cross redefines how I understand the ends and the means of what success means in the Kingdom of God.

The challenge I have observed is not just to embrace Jesus’ words, but follow in his way. How subtly ambition, avarice, pride, and envy may co-exist in our hearts, lying behind a façade of ministry success. Egoism and the posture of personal righteousness often are disguised as self-sacrifice. We live in that tension, needing prayerfully to discern our motives. We never get it right. As Paul said, “Not that I have obtained this...but I press on to make it my own, because Jesus Christ has made me his own” (Philippians 3:12). It is important to remember to attend to Jesus’ way of the cross in our lives and ministry. We have to keep ourselves awake. It is easy to be fooled and seduced by the world’s way of success. We are constantly challenged to measure how we live, act, and do our work by that cross. It is our constant corrective and measurement.

I experienced this tension in the church I pastored in Tacoma. I became frustrated that the people did not want what I wanted for their church. My pride and ego intersected with the frustrations I felt with the church. Jesus’ words came boldly into my mind, “I will build my church...” the implication being, not you (Matthew 16:18).

The cross tells us that all ministry is God’s ministry, not ours. We all are servants of what God calls us to do. The temptations to the contrary are subtle, but real. To know nothing but Jesus and him crucified is to enter the hard work of prayer and discernment, to discern what God wants, not what I want. We seek. We ask. We knock. God, what would you have me do with my life? Corporately, what would you have us do at this time in our ministry life at FPC? Too often it becomes a person or a group’s agenda

ving with competing visions. A pastor's vision is often in that mix as well, as I discovered. Harmony and peace become elusive. Only coming together under the cross of Christ, seeking his wisdom and way together, will we know the inner fruits of his peace and the harmony we so desire. Remember what Jesus tells us? "I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Through the cross we bring the face of God to others.

No path of redemption can make a detour around the cross. The cross is Jesus' way and he invites us to follow him into the crucible of life and ministry. Our boast can never be in our self-sufficiency. God uses the weakness of our human limitations to bring glory to God, not so much our strengths. In the end we know that we are doing and accomplishing God's work when we can join with Paul and say, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me ". Why? Paul tells us why; "so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom".

Jeremiah catches a glimpse of the way of the cross. Knowing and understanding God is to enter into acts of love on behalf of others. It is to focus upon acts of just dealings toward others, to care and provide a way that people have a job and a just wage, to make sure people can get the medical care they need, to care about the quality of the environment as stewards of the earth, and to respect the immigrant among us as one of our own, treating them as we would want to be treated. To be righteous is to treat people right, as God treats us, corporately and individually. These are the things that delight God.

The cross reveals to us a paradox. What appears to have the upper hand in this world, injustice, evil, illness, pain and suffering, no matter the vicissitudes we encounter on life's path, resurrection answers crucifixion, life in Jesus Christ answers death. Faith and hope in the gospel begin where life often seems to end. That is why we can enter into the crucible of human life, experiencing and offering hope, not just for others, but for ourselves. Because of the cross of Jesus Christ I can leave you with hope today.

Warren Schmidt asks, "What kind of difference have I made? What in the world is better because of me?" Ultimately, is it really about me and what I have or have not done? Could the question be, what have I obediently allowed the crucified Christ to do in and through me? Might it be bound up in Paul's personal goal for the church? ; "For I decided to know nothing among you except Christ Jesus and him crucified".

Christ is the center of all living. All that we do needs to be filtered through his cross. As Paul writes, "He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'" (1 Corinthians 1:30-31).

You have all been God's gift and blessing to me and Betty through the years. My boast is in what God has done among us. We will always carry you in our hearts and prayers. But I have done what it is that God has called me to do. Now it is for you to continue to take up your cross and continue to do what God is calling you to do.

