

Sunday, 29 January 2017

Power and the Way of the Cross
1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

The Corinthian church was a mess. Paul's letter to the Corinthians is one of the earliest Christian writings (53-54AD) and isn't it interesting that it is a letter written to a church full of problems. It is a church dealing with incest, lust, pride, greed, division, members dragging one another to court, church members visiting prostitutes, confusion about eating food dedicated to pagan idols, arguments about which spiritual gifts are more important, divisions based on which leader they wanted to follow, ... among other issues.

Corinth was a busy boom town. People looking to make a buck flocked to the city from all over. It had a mixture of people from all kinds of backgrounds. It seemed to have the moral standards that often go with a boom town- lots of greed- lots of desire to buy pleasures. The city boasted a temple of Aphrodite that housed 1000 temple prostitutes. The issues we find in the city are dragged into the church with the people. ... The church is always dealing with what is considered culturally normal. The church often has to confront what is acceptable in the broader culture and call the members to a higher standard.

In Corinth, some in the church seem to be using the old worldly ways of power. So Paul has to teach them that power works differently in the church:
1:18 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. 1:19 For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." 1:20 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? 1:21 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. 1:22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 1:23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 1:24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 1:25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

The world (Meaning, the world that tries to make it on its own ignoring God) is willing to manipulate, or play political power games, have popularity contests, and battle egos. It uses shouting matches where the angriest person wins. It uses threats of violence or manipulation of resources. ... But the church isn't supposed to be like that.

The temptations of Jesus to turn stones into bread, to lead an empire and an army, and to manipulate the leadership of the temple with a miraculous show of power was all arguably about a temptation to use power in a worldly way. Jesus wasn't going to be the military Messiah he was expected to be. Paul highlights the way of Christ as being about the cross.

To Roman citizens Crucifixion was incredibly brutal and disgusting. It was a method that could never be used on a Roman Citizen. It was reserved for slaves and terrorists. Crucifixion was not to be mentioned in polite conversation. It was vulgar. It had a social stigma attached to it that we don't understand. One scholar said "in the cross of Christ God affirmed nothings and nobodies". Crucifixion was the lowest and vilest and so were those it was used on.

It seems like some in Corinth were trying to move beyond the cross to a more power-centered spirituality (something like the Prosperity Gospel maybe). But Paul reminds them that the cross is right at the center of who they are. They owe everything to Christ and his cross and the cross is the model of how we are to be. The death of our ego is right at the center of what it means to be a Christian, so fighting to get our way is contrary to what we stand for at our very core. We see this all through Christ's ministry.

Jesus' first sermon is the Sermon on Mount and it starts with the Beatitudes (Matt 5:1-12). There we see the kind of power and wisdom Paul is talking about when he talks about the cross.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

Jesus begins with the poor, the mourning, and the meek. That is not who the world says are blessed. The world says, blessed are the confident, those who work hard, those who crush the competition, and those who take what they want. The beatitudes end with Jesus saying,

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."

This is a very different image of power. We see the way of the cross right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Of course there are many (in and out of the church) who will scoff at this saying it's impractical. It has always been so. People will try to use the world's way of power in the church, but the

church always becomes sick when that happens. ... But there are many beautiful examples of those who embraced the way of the cross. One of my favorite saints is St. Francis of Assisi. He was born in the late 1100's. The mediaeval church was powerful. The church and the state almost seemed identical in wealth and political power. Christian towns went to war with the city past the next hill over resources, or grudges, or just to get the upper hand politically. Francis was the son of a wealthy merchant and one of the who's who of the towns youth. At first he thought he might want to seek his fame and fortune as a soldier. And no doubt his father hoped he could turn over his growing business to his son. ... But Christ got a hold of him. Francis began giving everything away to the poor, even things that belonged to his father. ... While praying in the dilapidated church of San Damiano he heard Christ tell him to rebuild his church which had fallen into disrepair. Francis always took Christ literally and so he started finding stones to repair the little church. Francis became filled with the life of Christ. He was full of joy and simplicity. One person commented that Francis didn't seem so much a man praying as "prayer made man". He became a beggar and a preacher of the gospel. Soon Francis had people following him and he was told to talk to the Pope. ... The Pope at the time was Innocent the 3rd who was a man who was very much like a politician- even able to call on the power of an army. ... This Pope had a dream. He saw the church falling apart. In many ways it was. People were suspicious of the church's wealth and power in comparison with the people and the example of Christ in the Gospels. There were cracks forming in the church. All the world's power was poisoning it. In the Pope's dream he saw the church starting to collapse, then he saw this simple beggar catch it and hold it up. The Pope saw this as Francis. Francis' simple (but challenging) way of following Christ turned the world upside down and the Franciscan movement had an incredibly reforming influence on

the church at the time.

The way of the cross that Francis walked seemed like foolishness. It seemed weak. But it was God's power to transform the world. As Paul says, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor 1:27). Anyone looking at the church of the time probably would not have said it needs someone like Francis, but that is exactly what the church needed.

The church now is probably more in need of the way of the cross than it is in need of what we usually think we need. Maybe we just need a few more willing to walk the simple way of Francis, who was said to have prayed, "Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life."

Amen