

The Foolishness of the Cross

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Exodus 20:1-17

I Corinthians 1:18-25

Last week we looked at how Jesus tied together the cross and discipleship: *“If any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”* We pointed out that for those who heard Jesus speak those words and for those who read Mark’s gospel tract thirty years later, the cross was not some sort of iconic symbol or metaphor for enduring suffering. For them the cross was a cruel form of capital punishment used mostly for those who opposed Roman rule. It was clear to early Christians that following Jesus entailed great cost.

The cross is once again central to our New Testament text this morning. Paul writes: *“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.”* Taking up the cross and following Jesus not only entails great cost, it is also viewed by the world as an utterly foolish thing to do.

Before she moved to Colombia to work with Justapaz, Janna Hunter-Bowman worked for Witness for Peace. Her husband, Jess, was on the board of Witness and now works with Witness in Colombia. I was part of a few of the first meetings held at Sojourners out of which Witness for Peace was formed in 1983. Witness’ first office was in Sojourners office building. Today, Witness for Peace focuses on politically independent, grassroots organizing to support peace, justice and sustainable economies grounded in nonviolence and led by faith and conscience. But when it was born over twenty years ago, its singular founding purpose was to literally stand between the guns of the U.S.-supported contras and the Nicaraguan peasants at whom the guns were pointed. Two people from Sojourners were part of the first Witness for Peace team that went to Jalapa, Nicaragua, along the border with Honduras where the contras were encamped.

Initial U.S. press coverage of Witness was not very positive. To most editors and journalists, it made no sense to do what Witness was doing. After the first team went to Jalapa, I remember a political cartoon that ran in the Los Angeles Times. The cartoon

caricatured people standing along the border in front of Contra guns, holding a sign that said: Witness for Peace. The caption read, “Witless for Peace.” When I first saw it, I laughed out loud. I loved it. The illustrator, without knowing it, had hit upon a fundamental truth of the gospel, exactly as our epistle this morning says: *“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.”* To stand in the way of bullets like that, to risk getting killed over something not directly affecting you seemed like one of the craziest most foolish things anyone can do. Witless indeed!

Right-wing talk show host Rush Limbaugh doesn’t get it either. His criticism of the four Christian Peacemaker Teams brothers right after their abduction in Baghdad was more crude and cruel than the cartoonist’s. He first called it a publicity stunt, but then said, if the kidnapping is true, “I like it. I like any time a bunch of leftist feel-good hand-wringers are shown reality.” Unreal, crazy, witless, foolish. Standing up to this system of violence may have made the hostages fools and outcasts to some people in the world, but for those who believe in the power of the gospel of peace, it makes sense. The foolishness of the cross is far more real than Rush Limbaugh’s version of reality.

There is something inherently paradoxical about the cross. I liked the way William Stringfellow put it in “Simplicity of Faith.” Stringfellow stressed that at the heart of the gospel was a “sense of absurdity—an instinct for paradox—a conviction that truth is never bland but lurks in contradiction.” To lose your life is to save it. Unless a grain of wheat dies, it can not bring life. To take up the cross is to embrace the power of God. It doesn’t make sense; it’s foolish—unless you see it from the eyes of faith, from the converted heart. For believers, it is the very power that transforms lives.

Walter Wink, who has in many ways carried on the torch of Stringfellow after he died, says that the wisdom of this world is the domination system, by which he means the powers and principalities at work in governments and economies in ways that control people and resources in wholly ungodly ways. By contrast to that so-called wisdom, he goes on to say, “the foolishness we are called to embrace is antithetical to that system. It is standing up to that system that makes us fools and outcasts in the eyes of the world and beloved in the eyes of God.” The foolishness of the cross is truly the wisdom of God.

Paul goes on to quote from Isaiah 29:14, but I think verses 13 and 14 together are more compelling: *“The Lord God said: Because these people draw near to me with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote; so I will again do amazing things with this people, shocking and amazing. The wisdom of their wise shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning shall be hidden.”* When following God becomes reduced to following commandments by rote, be ready for God to shock.

Soren Kierkegaard, the great Danish theologian, addressed this point beautifully. “Christianity,” he once wrote, “has taken a giant stride into the absurd. Remove from Christianity its ability to shock and it is altogether destroyed. It then becomes a tiny superficial thing, capable neither of inflicting deep wounds nor of healing them. It’s when the absurd starts to sound reasonable that we should begin to worry.” He went on to name a few of Christianity’s shocking, absurd assertions: “Blessed are the meek; thou shalt not kill; love your enemies; go, sell all you have and give to the poor.”

Even embedded in the Ten Commandments is the absurd, the foolish, the paradoxical. The Ten Commandments don’t begin with “Here are Ten Commandments, learn them by rote,” or “Here are Ten Commandments, obey them.” Instead, they begin with a sweeping announcement of freedom: *“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”* We will probably always think of the declarations that follow as the Ten Commandments. But we could, and probably should, think of them as invitations to God’s liberation. Because the Lord is your God, you are free to not need any other gods. You are free from the tyranny of lifeless idols. You are free to rest on the Sabbath. You are free to enjoy your parents as long as they live. You are set free from murder, stealing and covetousness as ways to establish yourself in the land.

But that’s not how we think of the Ten Commandments. When Kurt Vonnegut was interviewed on National Public Radio about debate on placing the Ten Commandments in courthouses and the like, he responded by saying, “Why the Ten Commandments? I haven’t heard any of these people talk about putting the Beatitudes up [on the walls of government buildings].” He continued, “Blessed are the merciful in a

courtroom? Blessed are the peacemakers in the Pentagon? Give me a break! Not exactly the stuff of Donald Rumsfeld or Dick Cheney.”

But if I’m honest with myself, perhaps if we are all honest with ourselves, there are ways in which we, each in our own way, resist the foolishness of the cross. The cross, I think Paul says, is foolishness to that part of us that is attached to the world, the part of who we are that is perishing. The cross is God’s foolishness and is wiser than our wisdom. The cross is God’s weakness and is stronger than our strength. Rarely do we choose to be foolish or weak. To the part of us that is inculcated with the assumptions and values of our culture, our domination system, if you will, the cross is foolishness. It doesn’t make sense.

What kind of sense does it make to worship a God who, instead of rescuing us out of trouble, rescues us by entering into the trouble with us? A God, who instead of helping us to avoid pain, heals us from our pain by entering the depths of our pain with us? A God, who instead of fixing things for us, fixes them by becoming weak with us in our weakness?

But this is the foolishness of the cross. All of us know pain and grief and disappointment in our lives. Our human wisdom wants a God who will heal us and make us feel better. The foolishness of the cross is a God who enters into our pain and bears our pain with us. To the part of us that is human and perishing, we don’t understand this and we want something more. But to the part of us that is being saved, it is the very power of God.

And even more foolishly, this very same God expects us to do the same with each other, to enter into each others pain, to bear each others burdens and those in the world around us. To the world that is an utterly foolish way to live, but to those who embrace the cross, who take up their cross and follow Jesus, to those who are ready to lose their lives to save their lives, it is the only way to live, it is the power of God within us.

Each of us bears the responsibility of daily taking the cross more and more upon our selves, both losing ourselves and finding ourselves in the process. I want to close by telling you of one way in which Cheri and I are trying to understand that better for us.

As I mentioned earlier, last week the Mennonite World Conference General Council met in Pasadena, California. It is their habit to meet in between MWC’s general

assemblies, the next of which will take place in Paraguay in 2009. One of the speakers last week was Ron Sider. Back in 1984 Ron addressed the general assembly and raised the challenge for Christian peacemakers to form teams of people to go to places of great tension and violence around the world to nurture peace and justice, even at the risk of their own lives, like soldiers risk their lives in war. Two years later Christian Peacemaker Teams was born.

This year Ron delivered an address that called Mennonites to economic sharing. Ron noted that 25% of the world's Anabaptist Christians today own 88% of all Anabaptist wealth. What if those wealthy folks, Ron asked, what if those wealthy people gave 20% of their income to the church and 20% of that to Mennonite World Conference? This will never happen, he mused, unless there is a massive revival.

In our society, such an outpouring of giving, such an attempt to share that much wealth with people around the world would be seen as foolishness, as irresponsibility, as absurd. And there's a part of me that struggles with that, too.

Cheri and I give eleven or twelve percent of our gross income to this church and other organizations and people in need. I do not say that by way of boasting. I really say that by way of confession, because we know we can do more. But we end up usually feeling that more might be too risky. We need to have cash reserves; we need to have savings; we need to plan for Anjali's advanced education; and so on. While I don't think those things are entirely out of line with following Jesus, I strongly suspect that our attitude is rooted far more in the notion, so prevalent in our society, that we need to take care of ourselves, we can't have too little in case something happens, we need to be financially secure. It doesn't make sense to do otherwise; it's foolish.

Cheri and I rather suspect that our hesitation and fear to give away more comes much more from the part of us that is perishing than the part of us that trusts in the power of God. That's just one example of what this matter of the foolishness of the cross forces us to face. I'm sure each of you has your own examples.

If we want to take Jesus seriously, if we want to go deeper in our discipleship, follow in the way of God's foolishness. That's where God calls us to be.

I close with this quote from Frederick Buechner: "In terms of human wisdom, Jesus was a perfect fool. And if you think you can follow him without making something

like the same kind of fool of yourself, you are laboring not under the cross, but a delusion.”