

February 2nd, 2014 -- 4th Sunday after Epiphany

“What To Do With What We Know” Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Micah 6:1-8; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; Matthew 5:1-12

In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, he says the cross is foolishness, and God’s foolishness is wiser than any human wisdom. Corinth was a city at the crossroads between the East and the West. When Paul was writing to the new church there, the city was only about 100 years old, after having been rebuilt by Julius Ceasar in 44BC. The previous Corinth had been leveled to the ground. In a very short time, though, the new Corinth was a thriving metropolis. It was on trade routes and on the sea, so it was full of traders, sailors and merchants. As a result, it was also full of prostitutes, brigands and grifters. Even so, the Corinthians were influenced by the Roman culture. They loved art, theater and especially philosophy.

Paul tells the church there to be prepared; what they know about Christ is going to appear pretty foolish to the Gentiles and will be a stumbling block to the Jews around them. And the Gentiles and Jews of Corinth will know what they think because they are proclaiming Christ crucified. A crucified anyone is shameful in Roman culture. To use the cross to promote any sort of wisdom at all is a profound insult to the Romans, since the cross is the symbol of ultimate shame. It is a stumbling block for the Jewish people because shame and dishonor are how the Messiah is presented to the world.

And yet, this is how we know Jesus Christ - as the one who died on the Cross. When I was meditating a lot and living in the commune, I used to experiment with different meditation techniques. I created my own meditation based on my readings from St. Teresa of Avila and St. Francis of Assisi. It was a simple meditation. All I did was imagine that the Cross of Christ was inside of me. The meditation was simply feeling the cross in the ground, stretching into heaven and reaching into the world. Sometimes, I would do it imagining the wounds of Christ as well, attempting to embody the cross into my own body. It was a strange little meditation. And powerful. For a while following the meditation, I would imagine that I was seeing the world from the perspective of the Cross of Christ.

Paul says right after our reading today, “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). This is kind of what I was trying to do in my mystical meditation. The Cross became a lens through which I saw the world. Paul is calling us to view the world from the perspective of the Cross as well, and also to not really care what the rest of the world thinks about that. Because, finally, if Jesus Christ is God incarnate upon earth, then it doesn’t really matter if God is perceived as foolish. God on the Cross is still wiser than any foolishness or wisdom human beings could create on their own.

A life formed by the Cross of Christ resembles what we can imagine it was like for Jesus. It is a life formed by a faltering spirit, by mourning the losses, by disempowerment, by the sense of unfulfilled justice in the world, by mercy, purity, peace, by lack of understanding from others about what you think and believe, and by hatred in the face of God’s love.

When I hear all this - Christ on the Cross and allowing that my life might be defined by a series of negatives when following Jesus - it is easy for me to see why Corinthians, Gentiles, Jews, secularists and spiritual seekers would see this as foolishness and a stumbling block. This is what God, your God, wants from me? Hmmm. I think I will look around a little more.

But I can’t do that. I know something. Paul is speaking about knowledge and how we know things. I read an article recently by a professor at a university. He is a Christian and he teaches at a secular university. He

teaches a world religions class. One of the things he has the students do in the first few weeks of the class is to create their own religion. The religion had to have a creation story, an understanding of humankind, some sort of ritual and a way to become a part of the religion. There are always some very creative stories that arise from this experiment. But the professor noted a common theme. First, there was never any judgment in the new religions. The God or gods or forces did not judge humans in these new religions. There was never any expectation of commitment. Falling away and returning were just expected. The new religions “felt good”. To a one, over and over, however, the professor noticed one thing lacking in all the new religions his students came up with: a sense of the suffering of humankind. There was no conception, inclusion or resolution to human suffering.

Regardless of what you think about other great religions of the world, all of them deal directly with human suffering. The first spiritual law of Buddhism is very simple. It says, “Life is suffering”, like the Dread Pirate Roberts in the Princess Bride. “Life is pain, Highness. Anyone who says differently is selling you something.” Reincarnation is the recurring expression of suffering in Hinduism. To escape the illusion of life, Maya, is the goal of becoming one with the Godhead. Islam, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism all have very refined understandings of human suffering. To leave out human suffering is to deny, finally, the compassion of God and human alike. It is essential to our spiritual lives.

This is what I know. We suffer. We ache for a better world and a better life. We hurt from losses and our future death. In my spiritual wanderings, one of the things I always sought was what was most true. By “most true”, I mean that which most closely resembles, answers and conforms to life in all its expression. Not just my personal experience, but also what I have read and learned and what I have observed. So from that, I know we are physical creatures and this is a real world. It is not an illusion, which means our pain and suffering are not an illusion either. I also know we are spiritual beings. This also is not an illusion. Either our physical being creates a spiritual understanding and our spirit is subject to physical reality, or there is a spiritual truth that gives rise to the physical world. The only thing I also expect and know for myself is that these cannot be separated from one another. The physical world is dependent on the spiritual world, and the only knowledge we have of a spiritual reality is through the physical experience of this world.

And then there is Jesus. On the Cross and in the Resurrection, the physical and the spiritual become unified, inseparable, embodied and incarnate. The Cross becomes the lens through which we see our lives in this world. The Cross becomes the one spiritually true thing around which all ideas and thoughts arrange themselves. It becomes the center of our being and the point around which all truth rotates.

I say all these things as if I have thought it through in such a way that I have rationally convinced myself of the truth of Christ. But that is not really true. What has really happened is that Jesus came to me and hogtied me and dragged me back to the base of the Cross and made me take a good long look at my life and my spirit. And then I reverse-engineered all the thinking behind it. Kind of a foolish approach, but that is okay.

The Cross changes how the world looks. Suffering - Christ’s suffering and ours - becomes a gateway rather than a threat. It is the avenue into our new country, our new home in the kingdom of God. We begin to see that all our actions should be defined by that view from Christ’s Cross. It is how we begin to, as Micah says, to “*do justice, love goodness and walk humbly with our Lord*”. In Christ, we know some things that alter how we act and how we see the world. We are, as I said last week, still seekers, but now we are looking for the presence of Christ in all places and people.

Think, then, of the Beatitudes as the Constitution of the spiritual Kingdom you now live in, the guidebook of your new home in Christ. We now see the world, those of us who walk in the ways of Christ, from the

perspective of the Cross, as if we carry the Cross within us.

From that perspective, you now know that those who are struggling in their spirit, those who are “poor in Spirit”, are citizens of great respect in this kingdom. Our Constitution of Christ tells us that mourning is an opportunity to provide comfort, or to put it another way, the Kingdom of God is always a comfort to those who are mourning. The “meek”, those who are disempowered and unable to speak up for their own needs, are, in this Kingdom, the ones who are the inheritors of the world. And those who have not seen justice in the face of great wrongs committed against them, in the Kingdom of Heaven, will have that justice filled. The poor in Spirit, those who mourn, the disempowered and the wronged are like the high respected elders of the new Kingdom we live in. This impacts the community we live in here, the country we live in now, the physical, real world we impact with everything we do and say.

From the perspective of the Cross, which is the charter of the Kingdom of God, we know that the mercy we show others, the purity of heart we seek and the peace we make are all ways of being which define a citizen of the Kingdom of God. It is how we know we are children of God.

From the perspective of the Cross, we know that there is always the possibility we will be hated, reviled and persecuted for what appears to be foolishness to the rest of the world.

The Beatitudes are like the governing document for the Kingdom of God. They seem, on the surface, simple, but they are radically opposite to the folly of the world. As citizens of the Kingdom of God, we know a few things. We know the suffering of others. We know Jesus Christ and him crucified. And we know, because of Christ’s suffering for us, that we are children of God. What we do with what we know is seek out those who are our fellow citizens in the Kingdom of God. We find them wherever someone is broken down, in mourning, disempowered, wronged. We find our fellow citizens wherever someone is showing mercy, seeking a more pure way of living and making peace. We find our fellow citizens where hatred, persecution and disinheritance is making itself known.

As citizens of the Kingdom of God, as those who see from the perspective of Christ crucified, we are the ones who walk into the chaos and flames and offer the hand of Christ to the suffering. It is what Jesus would have done. Let us also.

Amen.