



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“Unconventional Foolishness”

1 Corinthians 1:18-31, Matthew 5:1-12

Will Sparks

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May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Mark Twain once said, “what bothers me about the bible is not the parts I cannot understand, but the parts that I understand only too well.” In other words, it is not the weird or anachronistic scriptures, the ones that leave me shaking my head in response to the utter bizarreness of them, the ones about God’s retribution, or when to beat our slaves or something, words that are clearly from another world and not for me. It’s not the ones I roll my eyes at that really bother me. No, it’s the ones that I get, whose meaning is all too clear, all too unavoidable, all too apropos- the ones that not only I think I understand but also seem to understand me- those are the ones that I keep me awake at night. And this week, those of us following the ecumenical lectionary are faced with not one, not two, but three such readings.

There is the one we sang as we gathered, Micah 6, in which the community hears that God doesn’t give a hoot about our ritual life, our religious life. In fact the quality or frequency of our prayers is not the thing that truly moves God. Rather, what does God require: seek justice, love kindness, and walk with humility with God? That’s what is called for. That is the measure of faithfulness, in an individual’s life, in the life of the church, in the life of our community, in all we do.

Frankly the conventional measurement of things in our culture tends to be success measured in numbers: numbers of people, numbers of products sold, numbers of bums in the pews and shekels in the offering, people served, hamburgers sold. And the wisdom of scripture says, how about we pay attention to the justness of our deeds, kindness exercised, the depth of humility with which we engaged life. Ok. I understand that all too well, and that is a challenge- to ask of myself in all things: is this just, is it kind, and does it show humility- easy to understand but unconventional.

And then we turn to the gospel reading- the Beatitudes. Unlike the view of the world that says money is power and power rightly allows for dominance, the Beatitudes- the opening statement of Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount- would suggest turning this conventional wisdom on its head. Blessed are the poor, the meek, the downcast and anyone when powerless, are in some way blessed. Look around. Do you see the meek inheriting the earth? How Blessed do you feel when people revile you and persecute you for the sake of the gospel? Has that ever happened to you? And what kind of a list is this anyway, the top ten moments in our lives: the time when we poor, when we mourned, when we were meek, or when we felt empty inside for lack of rightness in our lives, or when we gave in mercifully, or our simplest, purest moment, or when, in the midst of conflict, we made peace, or when we were most hated. What kind of a bucket list is that? A pretty good eulogy for Jesus’ life, but hardly the conventional measures of success we use.

And finally, Paul. With the church in Corinth, he gets right to it. Where is the real wise one here? Has not God made foolishness the wisdom of this world? Since in all of our cleverest achievements we have yet to discover the gospel way, God chose unconventional foolishness to really help us understand life’s true meaning. Jews held up signs as indicators of God’s presence.

Greeks elevated philosophy, the wisdom of the mind- that's how you find God. And God chose to be revealed in a crucified Galilean peasant- hardly much of a sign to Jews, and philosophical foolishness. But to those who are called to follow the gospel, it is our way.

You see, the gospel of love, the way of the cross is worthless by all conventional measurements. It will not get you a degree in university, it is political suicide if you really follow it and do more than just hold it up as a badge in order to garner the "Christian vote." And although Jesus said more about money and its effects on our lives and our souls, than he said about just about everything else, the gospel way is foolishness if you are trying to make it big in this world. Sell all you have, give it away, and follow me. It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich one to enter the kingdom of God.

And so we gather at the table that Jesus created. The etiquette around his table was considered foolish in his time, and in ours. Because at this table we bring our half-baked attempts at following the ways of Jesus, our gorgeous and stumbling little lives, and here we are received with mercy, grace, and joy. This is the feast of holy fools, the community crazy enough to believe in a God who chooses to be revealed in a cross, a way of life discovered not so much in our fullness but in our emptiness, not so much in our riches but in our poverty, not so much in our power but in our meekness, not so much in our gains as in our losses, not so much in rightness but in our exercising of mercy, not so much when we are acclaimed, but when we are persecuted. Not so much in our wisdom but in our foolishness. At this table God nourishes unconventional foolishness and calls us to live it in the world.

In the words of the Franciscan priest, "We are simply asked to make gentle our bruised world, to be compassionate of all, including ourselves, and then in the time left over, to repeat the ancient tale, and go the way of God's foolish ones." Amen