

FOCUS: The Good News is we are called to be united in Christ. (Second of a series of two sermons)

“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”<sup>1</sup> This verse concluded the reading from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians we heard read last week, and it begins the pericope, or excerpt, we heard read this morning. Last week, we reflected on Paul’s message regarding the problems of conflict and schism within the congregation at Corinth, and posed the question for this week: What does it mean to be called as disciples united in Christ?

When Jesus called his disciples as we heard last week, he called them by name. It wasn’t a blanket invitation to the whole of humanity, but a specific request to specific individuals. That pattern in a call to discipleship continues to this day. In our baptism, we are called by name as children of God and co-heirs with Christ. It is an invitation to be followers—disciples—saved by God’s grace alone. And as disciples, we are learners—students—of the One whom we are called to follow, Jesus Christ.

We have been called into discipleship of one who, by all accounts, should never have been followed 2,000 years ago. As Paul notes, in proclaiming Christ crucified, we proclaim a message that is a “stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.” But still, those of us who are called—in Corinth and in Beltsville—follow Christ anyway, for Christ is the power and the wisdom of God.

The reason Christ crucified was a stumbling block to the Jews is that the Jews were looking for the Messiah to come in a very specific way, accompanied by very specific signs. Specifically, the identity of the messiah would be made known by certain signs on earth or in the heavens, and the messiah would inaugurate a powerful and glorious kingdom while overpowering all of those who stood in opposition to God. However, this Jesus of Nazareth did not overpower the opposition or create a new kingdom. Instead, he was hanged on the cross like a common criminal. The messiah could not be killed in such a horrific way, the Jews thought. That is why Paul calls the crucified Christ a “stumbling block” to them, for the reality does not square with their expectations.

The reason Christ crucified is foolishness to the Greeks is that the Greeks—that is, all of the non-Jewish nations—saw their pagan gods to be invincible and immortal. While these several gods might take human form and characteristics, these gods could not be killed, let alone allow themselves to be killed by “mere mortals.” So indeed, to speak of Christ, the Son of God or God Incarnate, to be executed is foolishness to the ears of the Gentile. No god in which they had knowledge would allow himself or herself to die, so why should they believe in and follow one that did so? This is the “foolishness” of which Paul speaks.

And what should we make of God’s “foolishness”? This “foolish” God doesn’t chose to call the best and the brightest, the richest and most powerful, to be disciples. No, as Paul points out to the community at Corinth, as “special” as they might feel, they all were, by and large, not the wisest, noblest, or most powerful. Why would anyone want to associate with a group that didn’t include the movers and shakers? Especially, why would anyone want to associate with the little, statistically insignificant band of men and women who claimed to be followers and believers in a God who came to earth specifically to live among the people, to die at the hands of the people he came to save, and then resurrect himself in order to accomplish that salvation? Indeed, to the Greek this business of Christ crucified did sound like foolishness.

So here we are, gathered together for worship and service, fellowship and education, outreach and prayer. Why would God go to all these lengths to make that which is foolish in the opinion of the average human

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthian 1:18 (NRSV)

being “wise” and that which the typical human being would normally consider wise to be “foolish”? Why would God call together such a mismatched band of his creation, as Paul describes the Christians in Corinth? Why all this effort on God’s part so that we who are called Christian might be united disciples of Christ?

As Paul tells us, God did all this—the raising up of the lowly and despised in spite of the conventional wisdom—to ensure that no human glory might stand before the glory of God. The result of God’s action is, as one scholar writes, “that whatever status the Corinthians had was in Christ Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

As disciples of Christ, the baptized children of God, personal glory is set aside. As disciples, we are called to work together for the glory of God. When we hear of the scandal of the cross, we hear a message that is not shaped by the oratorical skills of the preacher, because the message of the cross is so bold—so overpowering in its foolishness to the rational being—that if excessive polish and oratorical skills were required to make it acceptable, it simply wouldn’t be believable or acceptable. Rather, the message of the cross comes to us—as it did to the Corinthians—by the power and through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Indeed, my sisters and brothers, we Christians are not brought into community together on the verbal skills or personal charisma of those called to lead the community. And those who are called to lead—both clergy and lay—are called to present the message of Christ crucified clearly and without embellishment, because the scandal—and the mystery—of the cross stands forth on its own. Together, as a community of Christians—disciples of the one we know as Jesus Christ, Son of God and son of man, are called to work in unity to proclaim this message for the glory of God.

In the message of the cross, as scandalous as it is, we find the power of God. We—you and I, the baptized children of God—are called by name to proclaim Christ crucified to all nations so that all people might come to know this scandalous act of love which God has done for all people. In baptism, the Old Creature—the Old Adam and Old Eve—die in Christ’s death and are reborn in Christ’s resurrection. In baptism, we are brought into the single Body of Christ and we hear God declare, “You, <name>, baptized child of God, are mine!”

As sisters and brothers of Christ, children of the same heavenly Father, we are united in one Body, one family. As human beings, we are by our very nature sinful beings. From time to time, we all begin to stray off in different directions, forgetting that we are called to work in unity for the glory of God. When we realize it—either by our own recognition (still by the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives) or when a sister or brother in Christ (again, led by the Holy Spirit) recognizes it for us—we aren’t always quick to make changes. Yet, by the grace of God bestowed upon us in our baptism, and repeatedly given as a sign to us in the bread and wine that are the Body and Blood of Christ, we are justified before God. Our sins—all of our sins—are forgiven and we are made righteous before our heavenly Father. We gather here in worship, service, love, and discipleship because we are among those “who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” We have been called together to serve to the glory of God in all that we do as part of the united Body of Christ. And, by the grace of God, our hunger and thirst for righteousness is filled at this Table. We come together at one Table for one Meal given by Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who sees the crowd gather, sits down, and teaches us, saying, “Blessed are you....”

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<sup>2</sup> *Anchor Bible* 32:161.