

The Power of Paradox
I Corinthians 1:18-25
March 4, 2018 – 3rd Sunday in Lent
Plymouth Congregational Church, UCC
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(17 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.)
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. 19 For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

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? 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. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

(26 Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God. 30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.")

Paradox: " a statement contrary to common belief or expectation, contrary to expectation, incredible." From the Greek *para*, meaning "contrary" and *doxa*, meaning "opinion." Paradox: a seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition that when investigated or explained may prove to be well founded or true. I have always found great power in paradox because it opens up possibilities beyond black and white reasoning, not discounting facts or logic but looking at them with new and unexpected imagination.

In passage we just heard from the opening of his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul proclaims the gospel through the rhetorical power of paradox. And what he proclaims is scandal to his first century hearers! His proclamation of the crucified one as Christ, the Savior Messiah, is "a stumbling block" – literally in the Greek, *skandalon*, a scandal – to the Jews. It is craziness to the Greeks who love logic and philosophy. The cross was shameful, an ignominious means of political

execution for the Roman Empire, an instrument of torture and death. How could one crucified be a Savior of anything?

My dear progressive, social justice activist friends here at Plymouth, this is a passage for us! As those who work for justice and love, who must work to subvert the status quo of our political, social and cultural paradigms of power, greed, prejudice and intolerance....this passage is for us! Paul is speaking our language in proclaiming the subversive, scandalous power of God's love and justice in Christ crucified. He is proclaiming the paradoxical power of the cross!

Let us begin with a moment or two of line by line Bible study to flesh this out. Paul is writing this letter to a divided community at Corinth, a church community divided between Jews and Greeks, divided between upper and lower classes, educated and not so educated – and a community caught in the cultural fast-living of Corinth. The city of Corinth overlooked two busy, thriving seaports. It was a prosperous, multi-cultural city known for its nouveau riche money, its lavish lifestyles of the rich, if not the famous. Paul is writing a letter of correction to a Christian community which has been drawn into factions between the haves and have-nots, the privileged class and the poorer classes, including slaves.

There is a division between those who think themselves more educated or “wise” than others whom they consider “foolish.” The “wise” have been lulled into a gospel message that is contrary to Paul's message by extravagant Christian orators, super-apostles as scholars call them, who have come to preach and teach after Paul helped found the community. Those who follow these orators are boasting that they were baptized by them into the faith. They look down upon those baptized by Paul and those who cling to him as their teacher. They critique Paul's presence as a speaker saying he is weak. He does not measure up in spoken power and presence to these super-apostles.

The irony, of course, is that in his writing, Paul uses superb rhetoric. He may not be as much of an oral preacher but he can turn a phrase persuasively on the page using the formulas of classical Greek rhetoric with the best of them. Paul calls the community squarely on the carpet saying it makes no difference who does the baptizing. It does matter whether or not they are unified in community by the gospel of Christ Jesus. Just before the passage we heard he writes in verse 17, “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.” Glib rhetorical oratory will not capture the power of the cross says Paul – only plain spoken words, paradoxical and scandalous as they may be.

Paul writes: *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.* Note that being saved from aimlessness and sin is a process for Paul. He anchors his proclamation in the ancient prophet, Isaiah, who wrote as God's mouthpiece, *19, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."* This is God's ongoing plan.

Then the zingers: *20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? That would be wise ones of the Jews, the ones who know law and scripture. Where is the debater of this age? The Greek philosophers and rhetoricians who teach in the marketplaces. Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 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. All the wisdom of the world, the rhetoric, the philosophies, even the Torah have not saved us as human beings from ourselves, have not redeemed our relationship with the Holy. 22 For Jews demand signs of the true Messiah, a conquering Messiah and Greeks desire wisdom, systems of great thought from great minds .23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block, a scandal, and crazy foolishness.

Why would the Jewish Messiah who is supposed to deliver the Jews from oppression, to be their savior, be *this one* who ends up as an indicted dissident, *this one* who proclaimed non-violent resistance against evil and oppression, *this one* who is executed as a criminal death on the Roman empire's instrument of torture and fear? How can a Savior be one who has left no powerful philosophical treatise, but only the stories and sayings of God's love and justice, and a reputation for not only consorting with the poor, the uneducated, the marginalized, but healing them, loving them as well? Scandalous! Crazy! It makes no sense in the wisdom of the world.

Yet says Paul....*This is the One!* And his death on the cross signifies *to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

This symbol of our faith, the cross, is not ultimately a symbol of death...no, it signifies God's infinite love for us, for human beings who do not know their right hands from their left as we quarrel about wisdom, creeds, philosophies and forget about love, as we seek to be one up on one another forgetting that we are each and every one of us made in God's beloved image. The cross is God's subversive message to the world that God gives God's self for all that God loves. Even creation the trees and mountains, the air, the water, all the living creatures and plants, the very rocks.

Jesus died a violent death as a non-violent resister of all that was contrary to God's ways of justice and love in the world. He did not die as the sacrificial victim of an abusive father's need of atonement so that the father could go on loving and forgiving all the rest of God's children. That is the theology of substitutionary atonement. We may have grown up and it is still a prevailing doctrine with many Christians, I find it empty of meaning and downright harmful in the proclamation of the gospel. Jesus gave his life sacrificially in dearth for what he lived, God's love and justice. Not to appease a stern judgmental God. He still put his whole life in God's hands. I trust with all my heart that God was right there on the cross with him. That is the saving grace of the cross. That we are not abandoned to death and the sins of our won hearts or the world that can trap us into isolation. The old poet and philosopher said, "Bidden or unbidden God is always with us."ⁱ The young poet and philosopher said, "...love is not human centered.....it is the center."ⁱⁱ

When we look at the cross....we look at Christ... the spirit and power of the living God that Jesus embodied as fully human. This in the Spirit alive in the world leading us in the subversive, scandalous work of turning the ways of the world upside down for God's sake, for Christ's sake. The witness...the death...of Jesus, takes an instrument of execution, reverses its meaning, and lets us know that death is never God's final word. The cross is a paradox – repugnant, visceral – and liberating,

enlightening, full of hope. It is God's ultimate "no" to death and "yes" to life that empowers us to live for Christ.

I say to you, my brothers and sisters, in Christ what Paul wrote so many generations ago, "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are...God is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God." Amen.

ⁱ Carl Jung

ⁱⁱ Colin Richard "Ferguson" Ward