

Pastor T.C. Arnold
5th Sunday after Trinity
1 Corinthians 1:23-25
July 1st, 2018

Expect the unexpected. That's a good motto to live by. That's not the only motto to live by, of course. Here's a better one – it makes an appearance in the Epistle text appointed for today. “We preach Christ crucified.” And with that, “we believe in Christ crucified.” Of course this is more than a motto, this is life. And while “Christ crucified” is not hard for us Christians to understand, to agree with, to accept as the essence of our life – since we have heard it so many times and know what it means – it was hard for the Jewish people back in the days of St. Paul understand.

Imagine this: one Sunday you walk into church, you grab a bulletin and sit down. You've done it that way a hundred or more times so you don't even bother to look up at the altar. But when you finally do, you are surprised to see, front and center, a rather large electric chair. You might be taken aback. You might even gasp a bit because not only is this unexpected, it looks down right horrific. What in the world is an electric chair, an instrument of execution, doing front and center in the church?

That is, until you realize, that every Sunday that you have entered into this place you have gazed upon an instrument of death set front and center of this sanctuary and about every other Christian sanctuary that you might enter. It's the cross. There it is, attached to the wall, in the most prominent place. You have seen it so many times you don't even give it a second thought. You know what it was used for. But you, along with all Christians, know it as the symbol of our faith. We preach Christ crucified. We BELIEVE in Christ Crucified. Unexpected? For us, no. For others, yes.

But now we may understand better that for the Jew the cross is a stumbling block. For the Greek the cross is folly. Why would this instrument of torture and death become the symbol of our Lord... the Messiah who comes to save? It can't be! Not our Messiah. He's too awesome and great to die execution style. He's too “all powerful” to die at the hands of His creation. His job is to come and defeat the enemies of the children of Israel, not be murder by the hands of those He came to save.

I suppose it would “make sense” to believe that the best part of Jesus is His life and not His death. Death is such a terrible thing. Maybe we think of death as more synonymous with weakness rather than strength... with losing something rather than gaining something. We get it. That is why, even today, the cross is a stumbling block and folly for others.

For example, some of you might have taken the time to visit the Mormon temple when they still allowed outsiders to make an appointment for tours prior to it being cleansed and consecrated. Now, only Mormons in good standing are allowed to grace the hallowed halls of the temple. But if you had the opportunity to look at the art work within each of the rooms, you would have noticed many of them had depictions of Jesus. However, in each picture he was teaching, walking with his disciples, or, even more strange, visiting the Native Americans on American soil. What was missing? It was the cross. To the Mormon religion, Jesus' death *is folly* because it meant nothing. They believe salvation is gained by being like Jesus through what we do and not what Jesus has done for us. For that reason, there is no need.

The paradox of the life of Jesus for our life is what is so important to our faith. The cross is vital because He needed to die so that you might live. He needed to suffer and take your place in death so that you will not suffer eternally. God's death puts His cleansing blood upon your life.

The Christian life is a paradox. It takes tools of torcher and makes them markers of righteousness. It takes a bleeding and dying Lord...a Lord who looks weak and helpless... as the means by which He gives you all life and strength. The Christian faith and life is a “flipped upside down faith and life.” And that is so important for us Christians to understand, especially in this life of sadness and suffering.

Today, suffering abounds and God’s foolishness still proves wiser than man’s wisdom. We work so hard at making sense of the wrongs that plague our world. At times we can’t understand why pain and sadness defines humanity... especially the faithful. If we are God’s children then why do bad things happen to us? Why does it seem as if we suffer more than those who do not believe? These are questions that have no good or satisfying answer.

You may hear people say, “Well, God has planned for you more than you realize right now.” Or, someone else says, “You don’t understand it but God has a purpose for it or for someone else.” These statements may be true, but this brings very little comfort to our aching hearts. What we want is relief right now. We want the salve of God’s favor to wipe out the bad and bring the new and improved right away. We want the pain to go away now... the sickness to go away now... the emptiness of our lives to disappear right now. These are the times we cannot make sense of suffering. These are the times when God feels the most distant from us, the angriest at us and the angriest we might be toward Him. These are truly the times when our wisdom fails, our answers to these difficult and pressing questions don’t satisfy and when God’s weakness is still so much stronger than our strength.

Remember how I said, expect the unexpected. Well, it is during these times of our weakness, our most pain-laden days, that God’s promises endure for us all the more. What is unexpected is that God knows our sufferings. He knows them better than us. What is unexpected is that God has gladly suffered in order to know your sufferings. What is unexpected is that God’s suffering produced an overflowing righteousness through His blood shed on Calvary for you. What is unexpected is what St. Paul would say to the Church in Rome (Romans 5:3-4)... and subsequently to all of us: “*we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*” God’s weakness is still stronger than the strongest man... a man’s body... or a man’s mind. And thank God, because what we hear next in Romans is what we need. It says in the very next verse, “*For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.*”

Thanks be to God. This weak, foolish creature who stands before you... all of us who wish we could know so much more about our troubles... have a much wiser and stronger God who knows infinitely more than we realize. Who says to us, no matter what, “*I am with you always to the very end of the age.*” Take comfort, beloved in the Lord, that while struggles remain in this fallen, sin-filled world we live in, our Lord has endured for you. And because He has endured for you, by grace you will endure in Him through all eternity. This veil of tears will one day be gone. And for that we can rejoice.

Expect the unexpected with God. If it’s not a good motto to live by, it sure is true. However, we can expect certain things... they will always be there for the faithful. God’s unending and enduring love for you. His precious forgiveness of sins offered for you. His gifts poured out in this place. In this mixed up world of the unexpected, we can always expect God to keep His promises. And He will. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.