

March 30, 2014

TEXT: I Corinthians 1:18-31

TITLE: Destroying the Wisdom of the Wise

This sermon starts with two statements I hope you will remember and perhaps mull over later today. First, Christianity does not exist to preserve the status quo. Reading the bible, going to church, believing in Jesus Christ is not something we do so that today will be a nice day and tomorrow will be just like it. There is much in this world that is broken, unjust, violent, and just plain wrong. Christianity does not exist to support the status quo; instead it turns the values of this world on its head in order to make all things new. Second, Christianity is not for wimps. Yes, I know that the Beatitudes say “Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.” But for too long those words have been used to suggest that Christians are never allowed to raise their voice; that oppression should be quietly endured and women being abused should suffer in silence and just hide their bruises behind extra make-up. Jesus preached the Beatitudes to list off the ways that faith in God challenges the ways of the world. Blessed are not the rich, the powerful, the abusers and controllers. Blessed are the poor, the meek, those who mourn and who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake. They are children of God, followers of the cross – and their strength is greater than all the strength of this world. Never assume meekness is acquiescence. Never believe that slaves are happy in their chains.

The two spirituals in today’s service highlight these points. Imagine a cotton field in Alabama with slaves singing in the field. The tempo of the song might match the speed with which their hoes dug into the hard soil, or the melody might help to distract them from the misery of hard labor under a relentless sun. Many of the spirituals used a *call and response* technique in which someone sang a verse and everyone else sang the refrain. “When Israel was in Egypt land” – “Let my people go.” Call and response songs create a community out of individuals. They remind us that we’re in this together and none are free until all are free.

Now, when that spiritual got to its chorus, the people sang, “Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land, tell ol’ Pharaoh, let my people go.” I bet that when the slaves pictured ol’ Pharaoh in their minds in the 1860s, they did not imagine someone standing on the banks of the river Nile. Pharaoh for them was the field boss, the slave seller, the plantation master – just as in the 1960s Pharaoh was Governor George Wallace blocking the entrance to the University of Alabama or Sheriff “Bull” O’Connor letting loose the police dogs on student protesters in Birmingham. And for many people today who still sing “Let me people go,” Pharaoh has nothing to do with desert sand or ancient pyramids.

Wherever oppression and injustice exist in a society, they result in “somebody” being treated like a “nobody”. Christianity always challenges what is unjust, but sometimes doing that requires deception. You could sing about Moses in Egypt and tell the slave boss that you’re just remembering a bible story from Exodus;

but in truth you're thinking about Harriet Tubman, the woman they called Moses, who used the Underground Railroad so slaves could escape the bondage of living Pharaohs right then and there.

Faithfully challenging the power of the oppressor has almost always depended on what I would call "wise deception." There was an old spiritual that said, "Got one mind for the boss to see; got another mind for what I know is me."¹ That idea is epitomized in the spiritual "Follow the Drinking Gourd." The verses sing about drinking gourds and rivers, but the drinking gourd actually referred to the Big Dipper which pointed north, and how certain rivers could be followed to freedom in the North. "When the sun comes back and the first quail calls" – when winter draws to an end and the days get longer and the quail breeding season starts – "follow the drinking gourd" – go north to freedom. "The river bank's a mighty good road" tells slaves to follow the Tombigbee River in Alabama north to its headwaters. When it ends, go north to the Tennessee River which joins the larger Ohio River in Paducah, Kentucky. There a guide would meet the runaways to help them cross over into southern Illinois or Indiana, from which they could continue to follow the drinking gourd north through Ohio and evidently on to freedom in Canada. The spiritual was a "wise deception."

Another example of this "wise deception" was found in the quilts that some plantation women sewn together that contained small maps in some of the stitching, or which, when hung out on fences with a certain pattern facing up, served as a signal to other slaves that an escape was imminent.

The famous boxer Joe Louis had a good quote to add to this discussion. Joe Louis was born in 1914, the poor son of an Alabama sharecropper who eventually found success in boxing, reigning as champion for almost 12 years straight. Muhammad Ali once said, "I just give lip service to being the greatest. Joe Louis was the greatest." Max Baer said "He [was so fast, he] could hit me 18 times while I was falling down. For me, fear is standing across the ring from Joe Louis and knowing he wants to go home early." Joe Louis served in the Army in World War II and was generally a humble and generous man. When asked about all his success, he simply said, "I did the best I could with what I had." Knowing that the man who said those humble words was the best boxer ever, there was obviously something deep within him that defined who he was, and gave him the strength to be the best at what he did.

Now let's put together all the main points I've mentioned this morning. Christianity does not exist to preserve the status quo – especially when the status quo is built around oppression, violence and injustice. To be a follower of Christ is not for wimps and the faint of heart. It means affirming something deep within us that runs counter to much of the ways of the world. Now, there are times in life when you cannot openly challenge what is wrong in the world around you. In those moments, as Joe Louis said, you have to do the best you can with what you have. You may need to rely upon "wise deception" – singing about Pharaoh as

you substitute someone else as the focus of your song. But you will definitely need to hold onto the biblical truth that in God's eyes you are "somebody," and no one can take that away from you. For in that moment, the words of the apostle Paul come true and you are "destroying the so-called wisdom of the worldly wise."

When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, he was quick to challenge their love of fancy talk and philosophical rhetoric. Greek wisdom may be nice, and eloquence may be enjoyable to hear, but neither requires faith – and so neither has any ultimate value. We all know folks with a lot of knowledge but not a lot of sense, or those who talk sweet but don't walk right. Paul spells it out for the church by asking, "Who is wise? What value are the scribes and debaters of this age? Didn't God choose what is foolish to shame the wise, what is weak to shame the strong? Didn't God choose what is low and despised, the things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are?"

Over and over again, Paul comes back to his main point: "The message about the cross is foolishness to those lost in the ways of this world, but to us being saved it is the power of God and the foundation of our life." When Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate and was silent, that did not mean that he had nothing to say. When he appeared to be humble and meek, that did not mean that he was weak and powerless. It is true that the act of crucifying people on a cross was designed by the Romans as a cruel witness to their power and authority. But to crucify an innocent man only undermined all that Rome stood for. To kill one man, the Son of God, unjustly set in motion new life for all people, all children of God. The cross was not a mistake – an embarrassment that needs the resurrection story to fix it. The cross was the focal point of God breaking into this world and destroying all the false values we hold dear; defeating death with death.

Our gaze in life is too often focused on the wrong things. We are taught to look away from the foolish, the lowly, the simple things of life; to reject those who lack power and position and wealth; to question those who trust not in weapons or surveillance or intimidation. Yet in singing the song of the foolish, lowly and simple, the song of those who lack power, position and wealth, we undermine Pharaoh. We become people of the cross, who see differently, live differently, and trust in something greater than all earthly power and wisdom.

Paul said "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." Being saved – this is not a "pie in the sky" theology. It is "here and now" good news. We are being saved when we stand for what we believe, speak as we are able for what we know to be true, reject the violence and fear this world treats as wise, and sing – defiantly, perhaps deceptively, always faithfully – until all can follow the path of freedom and all God's people are let go.

¹ James Cone, The Spirituals and the Blues, 1972, p. 27.