

Foolish Blessing of the Cross
1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12
January 30, 2011

A couple of weeks ago I met an artist who shared with me some of her faith journey. While in college she was the first person to be awarded a special stipend to study abroad. She vowed to herself that she was going to use that year away to “find herself” and draw closer to God. She studied art in Italy and France, and she traveled to Rome among other places. She spoke of that time as freeing and affirming. Near the end of her year abroad she climbed Mt. Sinai, in Egypt, at the wee hours of the morning so as to be at the top by sunrise. She described the bright light shining upon her face and just soaking in the beauty and the warmth that surrounded her. It had been her hope that in climbing the mountain she would encounter God. As she sat surrounded in splendor she waited for the voice of God to speak to her. It was after sitting for a while that she decided to come down from Mt. Sinai and as she descended she began to smile because she realized that the booming voice she expected on the mountain now spoke quietly in her heart and said, “I am here, in your heart always. You do not need a mountain top to know that I am real and with you always.” She and I laughed together and she continued to share tales from her adventures.

How many of us are like that artist? We seek a mountain top experience with God, when God makes God's presence known to us all around us or we hear God speaking to us quietly in our hearts. When it comes to telling others that God spoke to us, we are sometimes greeted with suspicious looks or maybe even an eye roll. I used to get so frustrated with the Psychiatrists I worked with on the burn and trauma units because if a patient made references to their faith helping them to get well, often the Psych notes would read, “patient appears to have some delusions of God healing them,” or “patient not fully accepting responsibility for their recovery as they refer to 'God healing' them.” It would appear to those who have no foundation for what it means to be a person of faith that we who do cling to the cross are foolish. Hearing voices in our hearts that we believe to be God and believing in this God who died upon a cross to save humankind, it simply makes no sense to someone who does not believe.

“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.” (1 Cor. 1:18) As people of faith we know the ugly truth of what the cross symbolized at the time of Jesus' crucifixion. The cross was an

instrument of torture, humiliation, and a excruciating death. It still remains a reviled symbol among some of our sisters and brothers of other faiths, much like images of a burning cross remind us of America's troubled and torturous past. So, one might ask the question, “Why did people follow Paul when he was saying that the cross, this instrument of torture and death, to those hearing him, now held the saving life giving power of God?” Why do we as modern day people of faith carry our burdens and our joys to the cross? We do so because we know what Jesus the Christ did for us upon that cross. Jesus went to the cross promising that he would send a comforter to us in the Holy Spirit. He went to the cross promising that he was going away to prepare a place for us in eternity. He went to the cross promising us that he would return to us. He went to the cross promising, “Lo, I am with you always.” In the cross we have the mystery of Jesus' death, resurrection, promised return and also hope. The empty cross is a symbol of all that. “For Jesus was not simply crucified, he did not simply die; he was raised, returned to his place of origin in the Godhead, and lives and reigns in the hearts of those who trust him, who have faith in him.”¹

What is faith? *“Faith is not a substitute for reason, or about blindly swallowing things we do not understand. Faith is about living with God, day in and day out, in good times and in bad, trusting God... Faith is about a relationship with God, a trusting dependence on God to do what God promises. Faithfulness is living out of that trust. It is what we mean when we say Jesus was faithful unto death. Even as the darkness of evil and death surrounded him, he continued to trust that God would deliver him and God did. Faith is living daily with the God who [holds the power over death and its source and holds the power to give new and transformed life] to us. [In Jesus' death upon the cross,] God identified with every innocent death, every shameful and inglorious moment of human suffering the destroyers of life can conjure, giving [us the] power to come through suffering, even death, into new life. Given the mess the world is in today [here is the Good News for us.] The cross of Jesus the Christ reveals the willingness of God to bear not only our sin, but also our sorrow, our suffering and the world's most heinous cruelty- even death.”*²

So, while we cannot sanitize the cross, we can look upon it and say thank you God for blessing us with the son, Jesus the Christ, and we thank you for the forgiveness of our sins and for caring for us, and loving us. In looking to the cross, we can find ourselves blessed in the

¹Rev. Dr. Fred R. Anderson. “God's Weakness and Foolishness.” www.goodpreacher.com

²Ibid. Anderson

midst of our trials. We can hold onto our faith in God's faithfulness and God's blessings when we look to the cross. When we look at today's gospel reading at what is Jesus', "Sermon on the Mount" (Mt. Sinai) we find that God's blessings and promises come to us in ways that are upside down to our human logic.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit." Emerging from this blessing is a promise: "Theirs is the kin-dom of heaven."

"Blessed are those who mourn." Emerging from this blessing is a promise: "For they will be comforted."

"Blessed are the meek." Emerging from this blessing is a promise: "For they will inherit the earth."

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness." Emerging from this blessing is a promise: "For they will be filled."

These blessings at first sound more like curses until one hears the promise attached to each one. Being poor in spirit is no blessing all by itself, but when attached to the promise, it possesses life-changing power. Again the promise being, "the kin-dom of heaven."

Mourning is no fun and hardly a blessing in and of itself, but attach it to a promise and a whole new meaning unfolds: "Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted."

"Blessed are the meek" does not mean we sit idly by and wallow in some sort of shallow passivity. Hear the promise: "Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth!" It is a promise that locates our strength not in self-assertion or human violence but in the unparalleled power of God. (Alexander)

People of faith are persons who have received, persons who have claimed for themselves -- the promises of God. Of all the things one might consider when one reflects upon God in our lives, we would do well to think of God as a maker of promises. God, the great promiser. (Alexander) It is when we look to the cross that we see God's promises made real.

From the coming of Jesus our Savior to the preaching of Paul the Apostle, it all depends upon promise. It all depends on a God who is not only a maker of promises but the God who can be trusted to keep the promises that have been made.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven and in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Mt. 5)

Pick any of the beatitudes and recall those persons known to you who have heard the promise: faithful souls who are prepared to endure whatever the present moment requires of them, because their lives are held in the arms of a God who is a maker of promises—a God who can be trusted to be a keeper of promises. What we experience now can be a blessing because in God's hands blessings are always attached to promises.³

So, when we look to the cross we see the blessings of God's promises in the forgiveness of our sins, in the promise of life eternal, in the promise and presence of the Holy Spirit (Our Comforter) and we move forward in life, come what may, because we know as the children of God that God keeps God's promises. We come to the cross in faith that it is God, a God who took on the sickness and sorrows of this world, a God who relished in human joys who meets us there at the cross, fully understanding our needs. It is God who promises us, "I am with you (always) until the end of time."

Amen

Let us pray.

Holy and gracious God, God of promise and steadfast love, we give you thanks for the teaching of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. For the blessings we enjoy and the sufferings we presently endure, we give you thanks. For the promises by which we live and for the hope of glory we receive in faith, we give you thanks. Give us the sure confidence of your strength in this present time and the grace to await the coming of your kingdom with anticipation and joy. Give us merciful hearts toward others as you are merciful with us, and give us the courage to be peacemakers and reconcilers in all that we do, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Alexander)

³Rev. J. Neil Alexander. "Blessings and Promises: Now and Then" http://day1.org/584-blessings_and_promises_now_and_then

