

Called to Mission
I Corinthians 1:10-2:5
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational Church
26 January 2020

Well, after his warm greetings Paul immediately launches into the first problem facing the Christians in Corinth—their splits. Factions had emerged, each one holding up a different apostle or teacher as their authority. And some really obnoxious folks saying, “No, I’m not a follower of any of those people, I follow Christ!”

Paul will have none of it. These divisions are not good for the Christian movement. They are a power struggle, rending apart the community that should be united, according to commentator Anthony Thiselton. He points out that the divisions really aren’t about theological disagreement, but about who is in charge. And that attitude will be deadly for the small congregations just getting started.

Thiselton writes that Paul isn’t expecting theological agreement on every point of doctrine, but he is advocating a “noncompetitive attitude that sets aside all hint of power play.” The congregation needs to be united in a common mission and not competing with one another.

Fortunately, splits and factions are not an issue for our congregation. One of the strengths of First Central, I believe, is your capacity to handle disagreement well and to create fair decision-making processes that generally result in consensus and concord. Maybe the best example was when we remodeled this chancel. That could be a very touchy subject, as people can be very sensitive to changes in the worship space where they are married, their children are baptized and sing in Christmas programs, and where their loved ones are remembered at their deaths. And Lord knows it took us a long time to arrive at the best plan—the whole project was seven years in length. But when the committee tasked with coming up with the plan made this proposal to the congregation, the final vote was unanimous. I’ve had colleagues tell me I should write a book on how that was accomplished.

So, the problem Paul identifies is not our particular problem, but it remains a problem for the universal Christian church. Plenty of congregations and denominations do have factions fighting for power. And clearly the church universal remains divided into our various denominations, sects, and traditions. Christians do not speak with a unified voice. We are not unified around God’s mission in the world. So working for that unity of mission remains an important project for us as we participate in the wider church and the ecumenical and interfaith movements.

Paul quickly turns from addressing this particular problem to raising a larger issue about power and also about wisdom. For clearly one aspect of the divisions in the Corinthian church was that some people thought they were wiser than others. So the key questions for this passage are “What is power? What are wisdom?”

In her book *The Wounding and Healing of Desire*, the theologian Wendy Farley writes that divine power as revealed in scripture is “mind-bendingly strange.” That’s because on the one hand there are stories of “outrageous power” combined with stories of “equally outrageous powerlessness.” She points out that this is maybe the strangest at Advent and Holy Week when “more than at any other time we are exposed to oxymoronic symbols of divine power.” She cites a couple of hymn lyrics as vivid examples: “Infant holy, infant lowly, for His bed a cattle stall; Oxen lowing, little knowing Christ the babe is Lord of all.” And “What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss To bear the heavy cross for my soul, for my soul.” The manger and the cross are not exactly images of triumphant power. Golden crowns, scepters, thrones, white horses, images like that are what we usually associate with power. But in the key moments of the Christian story we get a trough where animals feed, shepherds, a teenage mother, and subsequently a donkey, a cross, and an empty tomb.

But this is the biblical tradition, where power is usually turned on its head—a reversal of our normal values. I think the key founding text in this tradition is the Song of Hannah, sung by the mother of Samuel when she, who was infertile, gives birth to a son she dedicates to God. She doesn’t merely sing God’s praises with thanksgiving, she sets up an entire biblical tradition. Here’s part of her song:

Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the Lord is a God of knowledge,
and by God actions are weighed.
The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. . . .
The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
God brings low, God also exalts.
The Lord raises up the poor from the dust;
and lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.

In the great hero stories of the Old Testament this idea is manifested in David—the young shepherd boy, young and least of the children of Jesse, with no claim to power or authority. And, yet, the boy slays the Philistine giant Goliath and rises to become King, lauded as the greatest of Israel’s kings.

The Bible lets us know that Jesus grew up in this tradition of the reversal of values, because when Mary, the young teenager herself with no claim to status or authority, becomes pregnant and understands her child as a gift from the Holy Spirit with a divine mission, she too sings a song modeled on Hannah’s, a song we call the Magnificat:

“My soul magnifies your greatness, O God,
and my spirit rejoices in you my Savior.
For you have looked with favor upon your lowly servant,

and from this day, all generations will call me blessed.
For you, the Mighty One, have done great things for me,
and holy is your name.
Your mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear you.
You have shown strength with your arm;
You have scattered the proud in their conceit;
You have deposed the mighty from their thrones,
and raised lowly to high places.
You have filled the hungry with good things,
While you have sent the rich away empty.
You have come to the aid of your servant Israel--
mindful of your mercy--
the promise you made to our ancestors and their descendants forever.

True power, then, is not found in the normal status categories. Divine power often appears in the guise of weakness, in the underdog, in the poor, in the outsider. Or, as Paul vividly states in this passage in the Letter to the Corinthians, in the cross.

The cross which most people would view as a stumbling-block and a scandal. For only the worst criminals are crucified, right? How could the cross become an image of power?

Paul holds up the cross as a sign for this entire tradition of the reversal of values. All status categories have been undermined. The aristocratic values are subverted. By claiming the social stigma, everything is turned upside down.

Anthony Thiselton writes, "The gospel itself *is the* proclamation of the cross: folly to many it may be; but effective reality and transforming power it is to those who are on their way to salvation."

This gets to the most surprising thing about what Paul writes in this passage of the letter. All of those standard ways of judging power, wisdom, and success—those are mere folly. Thiselton writes:

People are wrapped up in illusions of wisdom while living in folly. The cross now becomes a sifting *criterion* that exposes the difference between folly lived in an *illusion* of wisdom and a humble, realistic appropriation of the *true* wisdom of God, which is effective in leading to salvation.

Reading this passage made me think of my favourite line in Christian hymnody—"In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o'er the wrecks of time."

As I pointed out last week, Corinth was a prosperous, important city. It was also a new city. The ancient city had been destroyed by the Romans and a new one established in its place, with new settlers who were military veterans, freed slaves, and immigrants from other places in the Empire. As such, it was a competitive, entrepreneurial place. Paul, in the opening of the letter, praises the gifts of the Corinthians that have allowed them to succeed and prosper.

But now we see the negative side of these gifts when they are not used for Christ's mission. Competitiveness can divide and separate people, causing harm. Success can breed marks of status and pride in those who have achieved. They can begin to think they are better than other people and judge people by these criteria.

But the Gospel knows no status markers. All of us are equal, standing equally in need of God's mercy and equally receiving God's love. The Christian church is open to everyone. All people are More Than Welcome here.

Yes, the church recognizes that people have different gifts, and some will be more effective leaders than others. But those leaders must lead as servants. Their gifts are no more valuable or important than anyone else's.

And, Paul reminds them in this letter, most of them really weren't such hot stuff anyway. He writes, "not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 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; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not to reduce to nothing things that are."

Damn. Paul is that friend who tells it like it is, bluntly giving you the truth. "You weren't so great, you know." And, to be fair, he says the same about himself, you notice.

But Paul doesn't leave them in this lowly state. He also reminds them that they have been made great. Great because God has filled them with God's love and grace and because of that they now have power, they now have wisdom, they now have glory. Not because of their personal talents and achievements, but because they are beloved children of God. And now their talents can be most effective, not at building themselves up or distinguishing them from others, but most effective when used as part of God's mission in the world, to create a new beloved community, to bring about more peace, justice, kindness, and love.

For the power and wisdom they've received from God is the true power, the true wisdom. And it's effective. Effective for their transformation and salvation, but also effective in dealing with reality. Because God has actually designed the world to work this way. And they will be working with the grain of world instead of against the grain.

So, our call is not to be great by typical human standards. Our call is to be great by God's standards. To use the gifts we have for God's mission in the world. And here are some of the signs that we are doing that well—we work for unity, not division; we uphold the equality and dignity of all people, not creating categories of distinction; our skills and knowledge are used in service of the common good, not just to puff ourselves up; we don't boast, instead we shine our glory upon God and one another.

When we do those things, then God's power will effectively work in us to change the world. That is our mission, to what we have been called.