

The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
January 29, 2017
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Micah 6:1-8
Psalm 15
1 Corinthians 1:18- 31
Matthew 5:1-12

The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing ...

That's how St. Paul begins this morning. And he goes on to quote a verse from Isaiah:

*I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.*

1 Corinthians 1:19 (quoting Isaiah 29:14)

Eugene Peterson translates it:

*I'll turn conventional wisdom on its head,
I'll expose so-called experts as crackpots.*

What St. Paul is getting at, I think, is that the whole wide world thinks the point of life is to prove ourselves wise or noble or worthy. Borrowing from Peterson's phrasing, that's what Paul might call "crackpot theology" (and it's still pretty popular).

But that's not the "the message about the cross" that Paul preached. And why, he wonders, would anyone want to throw away God's blessing of love and grace in favor of playing by rules that only demean and demoralize and ultimately defeat us? As Paul says:

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. 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, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

That's the Good News that turns the world's conventional wisdom on its head, he's saying, though he knows most folks think it's all foolishness. Paul says this the most explicitly, but that same thread runs throughout the other readings we hear this morning, as well.

Those final words in our first reading from Micah are pretty well known. And it's a great stand-alone verse, as far as that goes, but the real dramatic power of the passage comes from reading that verse in context. Micah sets it up as a courtroom drama: God is the plaintiff and the prosecuting attorney; the People of God are called to offer a defense.

The case, it seems, is that God, the giver of life and all that is good, brings a complaint against a people who reject the very same God who has been nothing but gracious towards them:

*O my people, what have I done to you?
In what have I wearied you? Answer me!*

God's case: I brought you up out of slavery. I gave you prophets and priests and leaders – Moses and Aaron and Miriam. I've delivered you from your enemies in the past. And I stand ready to do so again and again. We don't need to fully understand all the particulars to get the point: God has blessed them at every turn; God has given them everything they could hope for – and all for the love of God's beloved. And all they've done is turn their backs. That's God's slam-dunk case.

The people offer no defense. So they move quickly to settle the case. "What can we do to satisfy the complaint?" they ask. "How can we please God? What can we do to prove ourselves worthy of it all?" They make one offer after another, each one more exaggerated and ridiculous than the one before:

shall I come ... and bow myself before God on high?

Shall I come ... with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old?

Will [God] be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn ...?

The proposals are all rejected. Not because God wants more from us than we have yet managed to offer, but because God was never looking for that sort of a payback in the first place. It turns out that God never wanted anything more from any of us than what any of us can already offer: do justice, love kindness, walk humbly. God never looked for us to be superhuman, merely human – able to see and respond when see injustice and a lack of human kindness.

There is no possibility of our swaggering before a God who has already done everything for us. It's a losing proposition even to try. And yet still we try. Still we imagine we're supposed to prove something to God. We imagine somehow that that's the way it's supposed to work. Micah, the prophet, says that God turns that conventional wisdom on its head.

And Jesus is doing the same thing in today's gospel. The Beatitudes, as we've come to know them are poignant all on their own, of course, but the real dramatic power of these verses shines more clearly still when we read them in context.

Jesus looks out and sees the crowds. Stop there for a moment. That's how it begins.

Jesus looks out and sees the crowds and then he goes up a mountain. We're supposed to think of Moses, the giver of the Law of God – the words from God that give life to God's people. And then Jesus sits down, assuming the posture of a rabbi teaching the disciples who draw near to him. And it's only then that Jesus speaks. But notice, he's not preaching to the crowds; he's teaching the disciples.

And the first thing he teaches them is to look around and see these people who have come near. The disciples could have turned their heads slightly and seen them, this throng of people who have been drawn to Jesus, following him from town to town, looking for – desperate for – a miracle, yearning for whatever comfort and relief Jesus could offer them.

Maybe Jesus even asked them what they made of these people. Not a winner in the lot.

The thing is, the disciples were a product of their time and culture, just as we are. They'd have been conditioned by their upbringing to offer an answer. This crowd of desperate, needy people would have exemplified what it means to be cursed. Some people are blessed, athletes blessed with grace and strength, movie stars blessed with beauty and poise. Some of us are happy with lesser blessings, content merely to think we're blessed if we enjoy good health or a good home.

That's why Jesus pulls his disciples aside, right here at the start, to teach them something the world has never been able to teach them. So Jesus tells them that these people, these poor and hungry and desperate people, are – all of them – blessed by God. They have nothing to give. There's no way for them to prove their worth by the standards of the kind of world most of us settle for. But in the eyes of God, they are blessed.

Clearly "blessed" doesn't mean what we've always thought it meant. It's nothing to do with being happy. It isn't something you can see just by looking at another person. "Blessed," it turns out, means something more like honored by God, loved by God, God's chief concern.

That's Jesus' first lesson for his new disciples. And it must surely be intended as a first lesson for us, as well. Jesus begins by teaching his disciples – and us – that God has no desire to withhold blessings in this world, restricting them only to those who do great things or prove their worth. If God in Jesus shows up here, blessing this motley band of losers, then God will surely go on to offer blessings everywhere, showering all creation and its inhabitants with blessing.

Jesus invites his disciples, when all is said and done, to help him teach others that same lesson. That's the point of the last of the beatitudes, I think.

The first eight beatitudes (vv. 3-10) told them to work at seeing others as blessed by God, but here at the end Jesus comes up with one more beatitude. "Blessed are YOU," he says, addressing this last one to them ... and, by extension, to you and me. I think Jesus is hoping they'll take this lesson to heart and see themselves and others differently – as blessed. I think he's hoping they'll see that if they don't need to look for others to prove themselves good enough (or worthy enough – or "anything" enough) in order to see that they're loved and blessed by God, then maybe they'll know for themselves that they're blessed by God even when life goes bad, when people mistreat them.

And it will go bad. People will mistreat them. That's what always happens when a prophet or an apostle or a rabbi sets out to "turn conventional wisdom on its head," when they tell people that the way they think about this world is nothing more "crackpot theology."

It's only to be expected, after all, that people will have a hard time making sense of it all. St. Paul said it sounds like foolishness to most of the world. But this is only "foolishness to those who are perishing ..."

For you see, the way we try to live, following the norms of "conventional wisdom," is killing us. It's killing us one by one, as we crucify ourselves for failing to measure up to the standards of goodness and power and perfection that we lay upon ourselves – standards we'll never live up to. "The message of the cross," as Paul calls it, means at the very least we don't need to crucify ourselves.

And the "crackpot theology" of the world is killing us in other ways, as well. It's killing us as a people who think the point of life is to divvy up the world between the good and the bad, between those who practice the right kind of religion and those who don't, between those whom God blesses and those from whom God withholds a blessing (or even curses). Take care if following that theology, lest you wake up some day surprised to be on the outside looking in.

The Good News that is ours to preach looks like foolishness? So be it. Let us preach foolishness then. And, to us a phrase St. Paul uses elsewhere, let us "be fools for Christ." Because that's the only place we'll find life in this world that is perishing.