**Stumbling Blocks and Foolishness**

Psalm 19  
1 Corinthians 1:18-25

I suppose you could call it an occupational hazard. Someone asks “What you do for a living?” and before you know it, I am learning why a particular individual does not attend church and does not believe in God. I was attending our Ward 2 convention for electing city council members. We were in between votes and I struck up a conversation with one of the delegates. His response to my acknowledgement of serving as a pastor was to say “I am an atheist, sort of”….I am spiritual, but I don’t believe in God.” My response to him was, “It is my experience that a lot of times the God in which people do not believe in is a God that I reject as well.” Then it was time to vote again and our conversation shifted gears.

I have spent much of my life working to remove stumbling blocks like the one I imagine this delegate might have faced? What is the nature of the God, he rejects? Is it the God who literally created the earth in seven days, leaving no room for evolution? I reject this God as well and would remove that stumbling block. Is it the God that claims a masculine identity, leaving no room for the feminine, giving license to a human hierarchy with males at the top, providing justification for unequal pay, closed board rooms, male only clergy? I reject this God as well, and would remove that stumbling block. Is it the God of Genocide, who gives license for the Israelites to kill inhabitants of Canaan, men, women and children, providing justification for everything from genocide of Indigenous people in this country to drones against Muslims? I also reject this God and would remove that stumbling block. Does this delegate reject the God who demands our allegiance to an infallible, literal Bible, condemning our LGBT brothers and sisters, sending non-believers to hell? I reject this God as well and would remove that stumbling block.

A week ago, 18 of us from Cherokee Park United Church gathered up at the ARC Retreat Center in which we engaged in a discussion of the book “Rebirthing of God” by John Philip Newell. In the introduction, Newel tells about an image that forced itself upon famed Psychoanalyst, Carl Yung. Newell describes how as a 12 year old boy, Yung was walking home from school in Switzerland and passed the Cathedral. The image Yung saw was the throne of God, just above the spire of the Cathedral. “Descending from the throne was an “enormous turd” that smashed into the spire and the walls of the cathedral.” Now, you could say what else do you expect from a 12 year old boy? Turds are one of their main topics of conversation. But, according to Newell, the image was so horrifying to Yung that it took him years before he told anyone. Newell then goes on to say about the church and our belief in God, “We are living in the midst of the great turd falling. In fact it has already hit the spire, and the walls of Christianity are collapsing. In another twenty-five years, much of the Western Christian household as we know it will be no more.”

The delegate I met at the Ward convention is in other words among a growing number of people who has encountered so many stumbling blocks that the God of Christian faith and the church as a witness to that God, are completely irrelevant to their lives. For those of us who care about the church, for those of us who believe there is more to life than our material existence, for those of us who trust that there is a God at work in our world and lives, the last thing we need, the very last thing is another stumbling block. Yet a stumbling block is precisely what Paul offers in our Scripture lesson this morning. Says Paul, “we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles…”

Paul has it exactly right, “Christ crucified” has been and is today a major stumbling block for many people. I grew up with an understanding of Christ’s crucifixion that as Marcus Borg notes was and is for a large segment of the Christian population a core understanding of why Jesus died on the cross. In this understanding of Christ crucified, Jesus died as a payment to God for our sins. God demanded, required, that the ledger of our sins be compensated by death. Rather than you and me making the payment to God, Jesus became our substitute.

Borg acknowledges that for millions of people this substitutionary understanding of the cross has had great power and at its best expresses the depth of God’s love and Jesus’ love. This was a belief held by my own parents. But, I would have to include myself among the many for whom Borg says, this view of Christ crucified, paying the price for our sins, is a major stumbling block to faith.

John Phillip Newel says, in his travels, “I meet many people on both sides of the Atlantic who belong to the Christian household, either by birth or by intentional practice who find it impossible to identify with or in many cases even tolerate the use of this most enduring Christian symbol (the cross)…..So much wrong has been done by the doctrine of substitutionary atonement”, says Newell, “that the cross has become an irredeemable symbol for many”. That is a serious stumbling block. And yet, Paul says, we should proclaim “Christ cruficied”, fully aware that it will be a stumbling block to many.

One thing we should acknowledge is that the suffering of “Christ crucified” is a bigger stumbling block for many Anglo Christians in main line traditions than it is for brothers and sisters who belong to historic African American congregations. For a long time I found this extremely puzzling and hard to understand. Why is it that images of Christ crucified, a bloody broken Jesus on the cross, are embraced in historic African American churches, when so many Anglo Christians are turning away from these very images, finding them to be a stumbling block to faith?

In the past year I have read books by three African American Biblical scholars, all of whom shed light on this question. In his book the The Cross and the Lynching Tree, theologian and Biblical scholar, James Cone says this, “(Black) Ministers often preached about Jesus’ crucifixion, as if they were telling the story of black people’s tragedy and triumph in America…Black ministers preach about Jesus death more than any other theme because they saw in Jesus’ suffering and persecution a parallel to their own encounter with slavery, segregation and the lynching tree….Blacks pleaded, “Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross, because “Calvary”, in a mysterious way they could not explain, was their redemption form the terror of the lynching tree.”

In his book, Dare We Speak of Hope South African theologian, Allan Boseak, writes, “Biblically speaking, these children of slavery and Jim Crow in the United State and the children of slavery and apartheid in South Africa feel themselves, “the earthen vessels” that the apostle Paul spoke of. We might have been “afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; struck down, but not destroyed……because carrying the death of Jesus in our bodies, as Paul goes on to say, also means that we were carrying Jesus’ resurrection in our struggles for life.”

Finally, in his book, Invasion of the Dead, Biblical scholar Brian Blount says this, “The cross does not stand by itself…the cross must be approached through the contextual lens of Jesus’ Palestinian ministry…Jesus does not go to the cross because of a strategic necessity to die so as to pay the debt of human sin…The sole strategic objective of Jesus’ engagement is God’s confrontation of the satanic powers that hold sway in this era”.

“Christ crucified”, Paul knows this proclamation will be a stumbling block to many, then as it is now. But, the “foolishness” as Paul calls it, of “Christ crucified” has nothing to do with God demanding a payment for our human sinfulness. Christ crucified, is a stumbling block, appears like foolishness to the world, because rather than relying upon human power (economic, political, or military), the power of God is revealed in weakness. Biblical scholar, Jeff Pascal, puts it this way, “We are impressed with violent, ravenous power, but the cross means nonviolent self-giving…The cross reminds us of our ultimate allegiance not to our country, not our family, not our work, but to Christ. For Christians, the cross declares that we embrace truth when lies seem easier, gentleness when force is attractive, justice for the oppressed when maintaining the status quo would be simpler, generosity when hoarding would be more comfortable, forgiveness when a hateful grudge would taste so good.”

As Allan Boseak reminds us in the cross we discover that the power of Christ “is realized in a different way from the power of Rome.”

Today, many will march in memory of the events of Selma some 50 years ago. We do so as part of a tradition, led by African American preachers, fully recognizing that saying no to racism, saying no to the inequities in health care, education, housing, saying no to a criminal justice system targeting youth and adults of color looks like foolishness. The power of Rome, the power of Jim Crowe, the power of institutional forces in Ferguson Missouri and across the country may seem insurmountable and yet we continue to march, trusting in the stumbling block of Christ crucified and the foolishness of love.

In two weeks we will remember the day of Oscar Romero’s assassination, but with the people of El Salvador and across the America’s we also celebrate his resurrection into the lives of the people. The foolishness of Romero’s speaking out on behalf of the poor was a stumbling block to many, but for the poor of El Salvador it was the power of God at work then and now. Later in his letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul goes on to proclaim, “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, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.” I Cor. 1:27, 28.

I wish I had a little more opportunity to be in conversation with the delegate at our Ward 2 convention. But, I fully recognize that what we encounter in the cross of Christ is a counter-cultural claim to the power of love that often goes against the grain, is a stumbling block at times for all of us, and sometimes appears downright foolish. Yet, Paul proclaims and we are invited to affirm that “God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength”.

**Psalm 19**

*In our first lesson the Psalmist speaks of the word of God written into the very fabric of creation, available and accessible to people of every nation, every background, every faith tradition. The Psalmist knows that whoever we are or wherever we are, we are left with a choice to live in faithfulness to the God of life or to accept the dominion of powers that turn away from the creator of the universe.*

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens God has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a beloved from a wedding canopy, and like a strong athlete runs its course with joy. Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat. The law of God is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of God are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of God are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of God is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of God is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of God are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they then gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O God, my rock and my redeemer.

**1 Corinthians 1:18-25**

*In our second lesson Paul is writing to urban people in Corinth who are surrounded by competing ideologies, competing religions, competing loyalties. To many of them, who believe that God operates in the same way humans operate, the message of the cross is a stumbling block and sheer foolishness.*

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. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.