

# **“Dying and Rising: From Worldly to Wise”**

John 2:13-22 and 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

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This passage from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians was the passage for the first sermon I ever preached outside of preaching class. When it came to my turn to preach in our weekly seminary chapel service, this was one of the daily lectionary passages. Given that I was working on my 2<sup>nd</sup> 3-year master's degree it struck me as ironic to preach about worldly wisdom in comparison to the foolishness of the cross. One of our preaching professors at the time was teaching a class called, “The Foolishness of the Cross.” I wasn't in the class, but he was in worship when I preached. A day or so later, he asked me for a copy of the sermon for future classes. I didn't have the courage to ask if he wanted the sermon because he thought it was good or because he thought it was a good example of what not to preach, so I'm still in the dark on that. Rest assured; this is not that sermon. You can decide for yourself if it strikes you as wise or foolish.

Paul writes these words to a church filled with quarreling. Some members of the church declare their loyalty to Paul and some to Peter and this causes division among them. Paul urges them to set aside these inappropriate allegiances and to understand Paul and Peter as messengers of the same gospel, a gospel that is centered on the cross and on a crucified Lord. It's in that gospel that wisdom is found and where the power of God is found. We don't know how those early Christians responded upon reading this but the world hasn't changed enough even now to readily accept this view of wisdom and power. You may feel as I do that we're even going backwards a little bit. We're back in a period where the wisdom of the world says “might makes right” and “you are only worth anything so long as you can produce something” and “the one who dies with the most toys wins.”

In its own way John's gospel this week helps us understand where to look for wisdom that reflects God's wisdom. This story is found in all four of the gospels but in the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it takes place during the last week of Jesus' life. Here in John's gospel we find it early on and the author's emphasis is unique from the other gospels. Remember that John's gospel is the gospel of “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us...” One of its central messages is the promise of God in the flesh, God among us in a form that's vulnerable and perishable. When something is incarnate in the flesh, it's going to die. Jesus, when questioned by Temple leaders asking for a sign, something that indicates he has authority to throw out the money changers and merchants, says, “Destroy *this* temple

and in three days I will raise it up. [That's your sign!]" He's speaking about himself, and he and the gospel's author emphasize again the point that God chooses to be present to us most fully through Jesus, not through any kind of physical structure be it a Temple or a church sanctuary.

In wisdom that oft times seems foolish to us, God chooses to be present in the world through human beings. First creating us in God's own image, and then in, through, and with, Jesus – fully God, but also fully human, subject to suffering and death. So wisdom from God's perspective is shaped by this peculiar way of being present in the world, in the flesh and subject to death, even death on a cross. God is not just about the glory. The power of God is in the vulnerability of God, is in God's willingness to suffer as one of us, in order to gain victory. So here's my try, 18 years after the first time, to share some of the wisdom I'm learning that's shaped by this knowledge of God's peculiar presence.

#1 - Pain is a gift. I just finished listening to Abraham Verghese's, "The Covenant of Water." It's a wide-ranging book that follows one Southern Coastal Indian family through several generations beginning in 1900 and ending in 1977. One of the locations the story visits at various times is a leper colony called St. Bridget's. One of the doctors who works with the people who live at Saint Bridget's talks about pain as a gift. He says, "Without the gift of pain we have nothing to protect us."

In the case of the book, he's educating about Hansen's disease, aka leprosy. Apparently, the damage done to the bodies of people who suffer from leprosy isn't because of the disease itself but rather because they cannot feel pain, their nerve endings are too damaged by the disease and without the ability to feel pain, one's body is subject to constant micro-traumas, burns, breaks, scrapes, blisters, etc, especially to the hands and feet. Leprosy is curable now, but back then, sometimes the damage was so bad, people would literally lose appendages, or need to have their limbs amputated because of infection and other trauma.

We live in a culture that's highly pain avoidant. One that also seeks to numb and dull pain, especially emotional pain. But the wisdom, that pain is a gift, holds true for all people. Don't get me wrong, if I have a headache, I'm taking some Ibuprofen. There is nothing wrong with medicine; God doesn't ask us to suffer needless pain. But not only does pain protect us and enable us to remove ourselves from physically painful situations, but pain also shapes us. When I look back at my life, the emotionally painful and difficult experiences are the ones from which I grew the most. Without pain in our lives, we never learn about giving and receiving forgiveness. Some people who go through the pain of illness or injury, say that as terrible as it was they would not wish for their lives to unfold differently because in that experience they learn a great deal about themselves and develop deep wells of resilience and strength and empathy for other people who undergo similar challenges. Often it is pain that pushes us to admit our need for connection to other people and to ask for assistance from other people. The pain of loss and the pain of knowing that we are mortal creatures can ultimately focus us on what's most important in life. Pain, when it doesn't rule our lives, can be a gift.

#2 - I can't fix everything, especially when we're talking about other people, but I can still be present. There are people in my life who are hurting for various reasons. I have had to come to terms with the fact that I can't fix that and see #1, if I could fix it they would lose out on the opportunity to learn and

grow. I imagine that every one of you listening knows someone who is mourning or lonely or in pain or heartbroken or anxious. It's easy for us to feel so helpless in the face of pain that other people carry, that we start to avoid them because it's a way of avoiding our own pain. We may feel like we don't have any words to offer that will make it better and that is more often than not, true. But God's willingness to be present to us, is an invitation for us to trust that our presence, bearing the image of God, bearing love, is enough, even when we have no words, even when we cannot make things better.

#3 - we all need to give ourselves permission to simply be at times. We need this so that we can learn and grow and heal from the pain we suffer and so that we have strength and energy enough to be present to other people who are suffering. This is one of the hardest lessons I have ever had to learn and I'm still working on learning it. We live in a world that measures us by what we produce, by how successful we are, by our earning power, by our busyness. We wear our production and success and busyness like a badge of honor all the while exhausting ourselves to the point that we can't be present in the same loving compassionate ways that Christ was present.

The wisdom of the world drives us relentlessly, taunting the weak, lying to the old that they've lost their value. The foolishness of the cross invites us to remember that because we bear the image of God and because God deemed this flesh precious enough to take it on, just being is enough. This is one of the hardest truths for me to trust. But without #3, #1 and #2 are both impossible.

I'm learning that this wisdom applies to communities as well. As you continue to move forward into the future, I encourage you to keep the wisdom of God before you. It's easy even for congregations to get lulled into thinking that all they have to do is try harder and the church will "succeed," which usually means a return to former glory days. But even as you follow through with many of the wonderful ideas you have for engaging new people, sharing the gospel, serving your neighbors, be willing to simply be. Be present to the pain caused by changes happening around religious institutions in our culture, admit that not every problem you'll face is not one you can fix and be willing to trust God's future, taking joy in simply being together as you are right now. Together you are the body of Christ and your power is not in the glory of your sanctuary, or your music, or your preaching, or because you are progressive, it is in your willingness to stay united, embracing the world from a place of vulnerability, humility, and trust in God. Amen.