

**February 9, 2020**

**I Corinthians 1: 18-29**

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, We pray that the Holy Spirit be alive and active in this sanctuary this morning. May the Spirit breathe illumination of the Scripture upon us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

### **The Foolish Cross**

A few weeks ago, I mentioned the movie *Just Mercy*. It follows Bryan Stevenson's book of the same name.

Both tell of Mr. Stevenson's work to free innocent people on Death Row. But the book, which is often the case, is much better. It also tells about his work to change our nation's laws about putting people to death who committed crimes when they were minors.

The death penalty is controversial, even among Christians. But most of us can agree that when it is handed down in error or to a teenager or to a mentally disabled person, it is especially heinous.

*Just Mercy* follows the case of Walter McMillan who was on Death Row for six years despite the fact that 20 witnesses put him at a fish fry at the time of the murder he was accused of. Anthony Ray Hinton served nearly 30 years on Death Row for two murders he didn't commit. Bryan Stevenson got him released, too.

Mr. Hinton spoke at Furman last year, and cried as he remembered the years lost to him.

As I read *Just Mercy* and Mr. Hinton's book *The Sun Does Shine*, both of which took place in Alabama, I remember thinking, *This couldn't happen here. This couldn't happen in Greenville.*

But I imagine I am sadly and naively mistaken.

Both Mr. McMillan and Mr. Hinton knew many people who were executed during their time on Death Row. Every state is different, but in general, hanging was used until the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Then the electric chair. And today, lethal injection --

though problems in getting the proper doses are bringing the electric chair back into use.

In Alabama, the chair is known as Yellow Mama. In South Carolina, it's called Old Sparky.

This morning I ask you to envision these means of execution: A noose. An electric chair. A needle.

What feelings do those objects elicit? What do those images evoke?

People who favor the death penalty argue that it is reserved for the truly horrific crime -- murder, rape and kidnapping.

Those of us who argue *against* the death penalty cite the mistaken convictions that DNA evidence have proved, and the statistics on who gets executed. Almost universally, those executed are indigent, those without resources.

So when we think of who gets executed, we think violent. And we think poor.

We think of violent and poor people executed by hanging a century ago, and by electrocution or injection today.

I bring this up because our thoughts and feelings and visceral reactions to the gallows and the electric chair and lethal injection are exactly what first-century readers had in mind about ... the cross.

They didn't look at the cross and see sacrifice or beauty or Easter lilies or resurrection. They certainly didn't look at the cross and think it might look pretty as a piece of jewelry.

They looked at the cross and saw their society's means of execution for its lowest criminals. It was the death reserved for slaves and criminals and social outcasts. It was the death we supposedly reserve for our most violent criminals no matter how mistakenly and unfairly it is applied.

With that in mind, let's read this amazing letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians. **READ I Corinthians 1: 18-29.**

18 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. <sup>19</sup>For it is written,

'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,

and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'

<sup>20</sup>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?

<sup>21</sup>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.

<sup>22</sup>For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, <sup>23</sup>but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup>but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup>For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

26 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. <sup>27</sup>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; <sup>28</sup>God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup>so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

I want us to look first at what is NOT in this passage. There is no resurrection here.

You know, we are tempted to follow the Christ who rose from the dead, who triumphed over the grave, as our hymns put it. We want to follow the Christ who is trampling out the vineyards where the grapes of wrath are stored. The one we'll meet in the air, as pictured in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians.

But that is not the Christ Paul presents in the first part of his letter to the Corinthians. He's saying the cross, the electric chair of the first century, is the power of God.

You can see how foolish that might sound. From a human standpoint, a society's means of execution is the underbelly of civilization, something we nice people don't really want to deal with.

Yet, that underbelly is what God chose as his method for incarnation. Out of all the social circles he could have chosen, he selected the lowest.

He elected to be someone who could be executed in the Yellow Mama, the Old Sparky of the first century.

**“We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”** Paul admits that following a crucified savior doesn't make sense to anyone, Jew or Gentile. That covered the entire social spectrum.

It only makes sense to those whom God calls.

And who are those? Not much, by human standards. Most of the Corinthian Christians Paul was addressing weren't wise or powerful or well-born.

But for some reason, God chose to make himself known through those kind of people, not the wise and powerful and well-born. He chose to associate with the kind who could get themselves crucified, who could get themselves electrocuted. He chose to *be* the kind of person who could get himself crucified.

**“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...”**

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Now that may not make sense to us. Indeed, it can sound as foolish to us as it must have to the people in Corinth.

Gene Krcelic came back to visit us during a worship service last month. He is a friend from one of our partner churches and directs an international aid agency. So he travels all over the world in support of indigenous Christian ministries.

Back when we had an evening service, he preached for us one night. And the first thing he said was: “If Jesus came back, I think he’d be sitting on the back row at Triune.”

A lot of people have said that. And it’s not because we are doing things right, and we think Jesus would want to pat us on the head.

It’s because, if Jesus came back in the same way he did the first time, this is exactly where he’d be – among the poor and the sick and the broken. Among those who just might be crucified – or electrocuted.

Of course, Jesus could surprise us and choose to come next time as the mayor of Greenville or the queen of England. But if he does what he did before, he'd come back to a place like this.

Foolish, I know. But according to Paul, that was God's intention.

Quite frankly, this isn't the method I'd have chosen if I were God. I would have chosen to come as a person with a swimming pool and a yacht and a personal chef. I would have come as a person so wise that the Greeks would have recognized my divine wisdom, not as a person who was going to die as a lonely and despised criminal.

Do you see why it was foolishness to so many in the ancient world? It would be as if we were to become followers of someone who died in our death chamber in Columbia.

I have been hooked for years on Jodi Picoult's books. One of them is about a man on Death Row who exhibits many of the attributes and healing powers of Jesus. Jodi Picoult was playing with this exact same theme – the bizarre nature of this Savior we follow –

foolishness to those who are perishing, but the power of God to those who are being saved.

Because that's the crux, isn't it? Christianity makes no sense if you're looking at it from a worldly perspective. It looks foolish. It looks lowly. It looks despised. Paul's words.

It only makes sense if God has called you as a disciple.

That's why statements made by our president and the evangelical right strike me as little short of blasphemous. They want Christianity to be great and powerful and whitewashed, and know nothing of the message of humility from a crucified Lord.

At this week's National Prayer Breakfast, Harvard professor Arthur Brooks quite rightly said that the crisis facing our country is our contempt for those who don't think like us. He quoted Jesus's Sermon on the Mount from the gospel of Matthew:

43 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" 44 But I say to

you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup>so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.... '(5: 43-45)

And the president responded, “Arthur, I don’t know if I agree with you.” And he proceeded to make the prayer breakfast a rally for his administration’s “greatness” – which is about as far from Jesus’s message, from Paul’s message, as you can get. I suspect that for him, the message of the cross is foolishness.

You know, we pastors can live in a bubble. Because I’m at the church so much or invited to speak about the church or associating with our partner churches like First Pres Greer, most of the people I meet proclaim to follow Christ.

Vince’s friends apologize when they curse in my presence.

To this day, Taylor’s friends act like Eddie Haskell. “Hello, Mrs. Reverend Moore.”

So when I venture out into the real world, it can be a jolt. I used to teach Bible studies occasionally at the Greenville County Detention Center. The women are housed in giant dormitories, with bunk beds along the walls and down the middle of the room.

For a Bible study, I was given a small, bare room where inmates could enter or not. That way, I was not encroaching on their living space. I agreed with that. They should choose whether or not they worshiped.

But I was a little surprised at how many *didn't* come in. While maybe 12 women were eager to worship and sing and hear a Bible lesson, twice that many remained in the dorm with absolutely nothing to do.

To them, the message of the cross was foolishness.

For whatever reason – and there's really not one given in Scripture – God chose the weak and the lowly to carry his presence into the world. And so we must not be ashamed of our brokenness or

our poverty or our poor mental health or anything that is despised by this world.

We can still be the vehicle that God uses to shame the wise, to shame the strong. We can still be the one who lives in the presence of the Lord.

Jesus said as much in that Sermon on the Mount that Arthur Brooks quoted.

With the disciples gathered around him, he spoke a series of statements designed to give hope and assurance to those people not unlike a carpenter's son, not unlike his fishermen buddies:

**“...Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.**

**“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.**

**“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”**

Jesus started his ministry talking about the mournful and the poor, the meek and the persecuted, and he ended it on the underbelly of the cross.

We don't have to understand God's choice to humbly accept what it means for us.

That he chose our brokenness as the way to reach us.

Amen.