

“The Kingdom of Foolish Wisdom”

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Scriptures: Matt 5:1-2, I Cor. 1:18-31

This morning's scripture lessons are not easy to hear given the current political climate of the United States. Facts, science, and wisdom have all become political flash points. Each side of the political aisle has their own news sources, their own facts, and their own assumed wisdom. Each side looks across the aisle at the other and wonders what they are thinking over there and if they even inhabit the same planet. Churches have not escaped this tendency either. Within the United Methodist Church congregations and members align themselves with the Good News Movement or the Reconciling Ministries Network and look across at each other with a wary eye and a general feeling that the other side is completely missing the point. If they would just wise up it would be clear MY side is the true way, truth, and life.

I don't know if the factions of the Corinthian church felt quite as absolute as our modern ones, but it seems Paul's letter would have felt like a good scolding even in less fractious circumstances. Just prior to the portion of his letter we read today, Paul specifically called out the divisions the Corinthians were making among themselves. They were dividing into groups claiming themselves followers of this person and therefore better than followers of THAT person. Paul tells them

to cut it out and then continues on with the part we read this morning where he talks about wisdom and foolishness. It doesn't take too much imagination to feel the barbs and insults flying back and forth between the Corinthians about how wise our side is and how unwise their side. After all we have been bombarded with that nearly everyday from election season on into these first days of a new presidency. Given we are just a few blocks from a respected University and an excellent Seminary, I'm guessing there are many in this room the world would consider wise. Yet my news feed is also filled with stories about how some believe the science and facts taught just a few blocks away are nothing but bunk. Paul knocks both sides off their pedestal by lifting up God's seeming foolishness rather than either side's claimed wisdom. Paul tells them that all the status and power and wisdom they strive after and use to place themselves above others is nothing. He tells instead of the foolishly radical change brought by Christ's cross. A change which turns all human power and wisdom on its head making the first last and the last first. This sounds really good if you currently feel like you are on the despised and wronged side, maybe not quite so good if you thought you were wise and in the right. Then maybe, along with the Jews and Greeks Paul references, you might start to wonder if Paul is just citing a bunch of nonsensical alternative facts.

Our passage from Matthew this morning gives another glimpse of this radical reversal Paul talks about. The gospel of Matthew emphasizes Jesus' role as

a teacher and Jesus' lesson plan is often the “Kingdom of Heaven.” Matthew says of Jesus in 4:17 that he began his ministry proclaiming “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Jesus calls the first disciples and they set out “proclaiming the good news of the kingdom.” In our reading this morning Jesus sits down with his disciples and begins the now famous Sermon on the Mount with these Beatitudes which describe this Kingdom of Heaven he will give his whole life, his death, and his resurrection to proclaim.

While the metaphor of a “kingdom” can be problematic in our day and culture, in the time in which Jesus lived it would have been a declaration of protest and of allegiance to a power greater than the unjust Roman Empire that ruled his listeners' and disciples' lives. The kingdom of heaven he describes is a radical reversal of the political and social situation of the day. Most of the people following him around that day were not likely members of the elite in the Roman Empire. They likely did not feel very “blessed” - or fortunate, happy or privileged as the Beatitudes could also be translated. His words may have sounded a bit like alternative facts.

Yet something also would have sounded very familiar and comforting. Although these Beatitudes fly in the face of the wisdom of the Roman Empire, they are also completely in line with Jewish traditions and hopes that Jesus would have grown up with, a continuity emphasized throughout Matthew. The story in its

larger context of the Sermon on the Mount hints back at Moses on Mt. Sinai receiving the Commandments. Today's Matthew passage contains many parallels to the prophet Isaiah and to the Psalms. These traditions promised that God would redeem the people of Israel at some future point and establish God's reign over them. They were a cry of hope in the midst of terrible oppression and disappointment. You may be suffering now, this tradition proclaimed, but God is going to come, and when God does – look out!

Jesus declared throughout his ministry that the future time was now – God has come and is coming still. The gospel of Luke records a story of Jesus going to the synagogue, reading the designated morning's scripture lesson and then declaring that the promises of the prophet Isaiah he had just read had been fulfilled: that the poor receive good news, captives are released, people who are blind recover sight, and the oppressed are freed. Jesus declares those promises are here and now. In the beatitudes we read this morning two of them reference the kingdom of heaven, and both of those are in the present tense – theirs IS the kingdom of heaven. All the ways human devise of removing power and legitimacy from each other are radically erased now. In Paul's letter to the Corinthian's he declares our boasting of our own wisdom and strength no longer divides us. In his letter to another community in Galatia he declares “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free there is no longer male and female; for all of

you are one in Christ Jesus”(3:28).

The kingdom is NOW.... And yet... It is not yet.

While two of the Beatitudes are in the present tense, the rest are in the future tense. Jesus looked around him and saw many who were poor, mourning, denied power, shown no mercy, devastated by war, and persecuted. He knew the desperation of the crowds who had followed him to the mountain where he now sat and taught. I can also imagine Paul's head sinking as he received reports of the infighting in the Corinthian church, this group that should have been so united that they were one body.

We, too, know that the left side of the Beatitudes still so often seems truer than the right side. There are still some among us who must constantly worry about where to lay their heads tonight or where the next meal will come from. Those who have lost their jobs and don't know how long they will be able to keep everything going. There are still some among of us who have lost all hope, or who have been cast off by society. It does not feel as if we have received the Kingdom.

Among us are those who have lost loved ones to senseless violence, to drugs and alcohol, to suicide. Those who have watched loved ones slowly taken away by dementia and Alzheimer and debilitating disease. Those fleeing danger only to find themselves locked in an airport. Where is their comfort?

We look around in despair at the mess in the world around us. The

corruption, the division, the racism, the homophobia, the misogyny, the xenophobia, locking out refugees, the lack of a state budget for crying out loud - How long? How long O God? We hunger and thirst for your kingdom. How long until we can taste it? Where are your peacemakers, your merciful ones, your pure in heart, your...

Oh <look around> oh wait! Would you read with me again our Call to worship which comes from Micah 6:8:

What does the Lord require of you,

but to do justice,

love kindness,

and walk humbly with God?

DO justice, LOVE kindness, WALK humbly, all action verbs. We aren't called to just sit and wait for justice and kindness and God's coming. We have a sanctuary full of peacemakers and mercy bringers and pure hearts right here and now!

Those of you here who work tirelessly for good from within flawed systems of government, corporations, not-for-profits, clubs, and schools, you, you have tasted the Kingdom and hunger and thirst for more.

Those of you who who are hosting and welcoming refugee families, who are spilling out into the streets in protest, write letters, call representatives, sign petitions, wear rainbow stoles and pink cat ears and safety pins to hold the systems

accountable, you, you who have tasted the Kingdom and hunger and thirst for more.

In the midst of a broken world we declare the foolish wisdom that we already live in the Kingdom of Heaven. We do so, not ignorant of the real devastation around us, but in spite of it. We have already been blessed, even while we are still poor, still mourning, still powerless, still hungry, still longing for mercy, pure hearts and peace. As Paul reminds us, Christians can live with foolishly wise hope in the very real despair of crucifixion because we know that Easter has come and that Easter is coming still. The Kingdom of Heaven has come near, are you living in that promise?