

Tuesday in Holy Week
Sermon by the Rev'd A. Robert Hirschfeld
Grace Church, Amherst
April 7, 2009

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Psalm 71:1-14

John 12:20-36

“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing; but to those who are being saved it is the power of God.” Paul tells the sophisticated congregation in Corinth, “...we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”

The path before us this week is a bumpy one. The way towards the cross brings us ever deeper into the heart of God's love for us. We are walking with Jesus. And as we walk with Jesus along this road we come to sense the enormity of the conflict between the power of God's love on the one hand and the powers of this world on the other. Not to be too melodramatic, but as we walk with Jesus in this final week, it is as though we can hear the thunder rumbling on each side of the road, the winds whipping up, the forces of the cosmos assembling for a cataclysmic contest.

So it is no surprise that as we walk along this road that leads to the cross, as we do year after year, we might stumble. We might twist our ankles, if you will, and twist the ankles of our heart and minds. (The psalms say that we bend the knee of our heart, so I guess I can say we can twist the ankles of our heart, too). For that is what the message of the Cross is, according to Paul, a stumbling block. The Greek word for a stumbling block is *scandalon*. A scandal is something that causes us to trip; it impedes our approach and our assent of something or someone. If I am scandalized by someone's behavior, say, like the crying of a child in church, my heart is impeded, I am tripped up, from embracing or welcoming that child's presence in the sanctuary. Think of all the scandals of the church, some are real scandals, and some are quite trivial. The placement of a drainage pipe on our front lawn can be a scandal, but considering all the stumbling blocks we could stumble over, is it one worthy of the energy of our whole parish?

The Cross, according to Paul, is the ultimate scandal. It doesn't make the way smooth, but first can impede our path to God. The Cross represents something completely antithetical to how we believe God's will is to be made known to us. “God forbid” that such a fate should happen to you, O Lord,” is the sound of Peter being the first to stumble over the Cross of Christ. And Peter is rebuked. Roundly rebuke. Year after year after year, if not day after day, we are to be reminded just how the Cross of Christ scandalizes us and causes us to stumble.

The scandal has to do with power, really, and different notions about what the power of God is like. Are not the ones who have power and status and position in the Church the

same one whom the world deems worthy...the well educated, the financially stable, the attractive, the ones with the right diplomas and certificates on the wall. Usually it's the ones who know the language of the little micro-culture of a particular congregation, or town or neighborhood. To be honest, I am pretty sure I benefit from that kind of power-- I have been honored more than I deserve and yet not as much as my greedy, envious little heart would like.

And the power that we share, the power of what one pastoral theologian called the "Apostolic Core" of a parish, another word for the "inner circle," is not easily shared. Others, like new comers, (who seem to be forever newly arrived, even after being received or confirmed and having been here for years) or the over-enthusiastic, or the slightly unstable, usually learn how to keep their appropriate distance from the inner circle, right?

This was the situation that Paul was addressing when he describes the proclamation of the Cross as Scandal, as Stumbling Block. There are divisions in the church, there are those on the inside, those on the outside, quarrelling. So say, "I belong to Paul." Some say, "I belong to the Apollos' Coventry Group" Or I belong to the "Cephas Pastorate", or the 8 o'clock service, or the Choir, or the Vestry, or the Finance Committee. If we're healthy, none of these groups or activities claim any more power over another. But in Corinth, the grouping had become little cliques of power and maneuvering. And the engine of such divisions, what gives them such power is this idea that some are more wise or more holy or more righteous or more worthy of control than the others.

Paul's remedy to that mindset is to reintroduce the Church in Corinth to the Scandal of the Cross. What power, or righteousness, or holiness does Jesus claim? How does Jesus demonstrate Christian "perfection", if you will? By loving his enemy, by consorting with the unrighteous, the losers of the world, the eccentric characters, the disenfranchised. He so closely indentified with them that he chose to become one himself. He chose to "become sin who knew no sin," by becoming cursed under the law by hanging on a tree. He so chooses to be with the outcast that he is literally cast out into the outskirts of the city and is crucified, stripped of all dignity, power, attractiveness, strength. Able to reason his way out of such trouble, he chooses instead to remain silent before the authorities, to speak nonsense. What logician could make sense out of the answer Jesus gives to the Greeks who seek him: "Surely, unless the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just one grain." To Pilate's questions, what is Truth? Jesus just stands there, a giant stumbling block, a scandal, refusing to help Pilate out of the political box that he finds himself in.

But what if the church reclaimed its proclamation, without shame or fear, the message of the Stumbling Block of the Cross? What if we really got it? How would the Scandal shape our prayers, inform our way of doing business, direct our approach to our brothers and sisters that we know here, or the ones that the Spirit seems to lead into our fellowship? Now this is not say that we get it all wrong all the time, but merely to say that

tonight is the night in Holy Week when we get to remind ourselves again of the implications of the Scandal of the Cross, its foolishness, in our life together.

One example come to mind. Some years ago a young man on the way out of the church after a Palm Sunday, asked if I would pray for him. Specifically, he asked if I would pray that he would make partner at his law firm, a position he had been working 70-80 hours a week to attain. He was married, had a young child. Of course, I wanted him to get what he wanted. But what did God want? What if the attainment of earthly glory wasn't really the point? It could have been, and quite possibly he was doing good work that furthered the goal of justice. If he got to be partner, and he continued to tithe. So everyone could win, right? But what of the Cross, that event in human history that stops us in our tracks and says, you know what, making partner won't make me love you anymore. It won't, in itself, bring you to God. In fact, it could just be a huge distraction, a foolish trick that might make you believe that achievement, attainment of worldly glory and tokens of the wisdom and power of this world are actually signs of God's favor. The Cross says otherwise.

How many children and their families are utterly stressed out about the prestige of the college their senior will or won't be accepted in? How many fights at the dinner table are going on right at this moment throughout our town and our nation, as young souls and their parents pin their whole identity and self worth on the results of a college acceptance, or a board score, or a win on the athletic field, or an award on the dance floor or the orchestra hall? Sure, these pursuits are healthy and good, opportunities for us to exercise our God-given talents and to enjoy the many gifts bestowed on us in such variety and difference, but how soon they become idols, emblems of our reliance on our ourselves, and not on God.

God is not interested so much in our rewards, the accolades. He simply wants us to know God's love for us and to know that that love is to be shared, poured out from Christ, through our service and kindnesses and sacrifices for the other, especially those who are not considered wise, or strong, or noble, or even lovable by the world's standards, and too often, sadly, by the Church's standards. So let us pray this week for a spirit of contrition, amendment, and forgiveness, as we, in this Church, seek again to be scandalized, tripped up by the stumbling block of the Cross of Christ, in whom only is our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. Amen.