

EPIPHANY 4, YEAR A

January 29, 2017

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In the book *Forty Days and Forty Nights*, Brother Ramon notes, “In these days when words are so cheap in the worlds of commerce, politics and even education, when market forces and advertising expertise further devalue the written and spoken word, it is refreshing and exciting to get back to the plain word of Scripture and be confronted with words of power and integrity. The Gospels are so simple that a child can understand them yet so profound and mystical that they are beyond the comprehension of a philosopher or literary critic.”

Profound words in the light of today’s lessons: Micah’s exhortation, the Beatitudes which open the Sermon on the Mount, and this opening line from today’s epistle, “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Many a Christian finds themselves under the suspicion of friends and family and strangers because when we’re doing what we’re supposed to, what we do doesn’t make sense alongside the ways of the world. People seem to think that the things we do or believe make us radicals. But the definition of a radical is that which goes to the root of something, affecting the fundamental nature of something. And that is exactly what the cross calls us to.

We are not called to be Christians in name or appearance only. We are to be changed at our very core. And if we are in Christ we have been changed. By the cross, Jesus reaches in to the depths of our sinfulness and pulls us free from it. But that doesn’t make sense to the world of Jesus’ day or ours. That God would come among us in the Incarnation is hard enough to believe, but that he had to die for us, that he would want to die for us, in order to save us is beyond comprehension.

It is so unconceivable because tied up in that passing upon the cross, yoked to the instrument of torture, shame, and death, is the means to new life and the knowledge that Jesus Christ rose again. Life as we know it changed on the arms of a cross. The very foundation of the world was shaken by it. The cross is truly radical, going to the root of humanity as the old life is swallowed up in death so that in the fullness of time death itself may be overcome with new life.

We have been changed to the core by the cross of Christ, and while it serves as a signpost for us and the way that we are called to walk, it is folly to those who are perishing and a stumbling block to those around us. As we are conformed to likeness of Christ and his cross, we become, like him, a threat to the status quo.

In Jesus’ day, as in ours, the strong typically triumph over the weak, the powerful take from the powerless. Today’s beatitudes are a list of those who at face value don’t stand a chance in this world. If they were to stand up and be counted, they would be knocked down and run over without so much as a second thought.

And yet, these are the blessed. These are they who shall inherit the blessings laid out by Jesus of the kingdom of heaven and earth, of comfort and righteousness and mercy, of seeing God and being his children. It doesn’t make sense. It doesn’t work according to the ways of the world. To believe it is folly. It’s crazy talk. But it isn’t that Christians are too crazy (though there are a few of those running around). No, the thing of it is that Christians aren’t crazy enough. We aren’t nearly foolish enough.

We let logic get in the way of our foolishness. We live in the world of mankind. We see each other, interact with each other. We have a tangible or sensible relationship. What we believe though is that there is more than

meets the eye. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Believing in something is all well and good, but what happens when faith meets the concrete realities of our earthly life?

The great philosopher Albus Dumbledore once said, "It takes a great deal of courage to stand up to your enemies, but a great deal more to stand up to your friends." (HPSS). It seems quite apropos for us as a nation, as a denomination, even as a church at times. Too often do we see those who believe in Jesus and yet are unwilling to stand up to their friends to do so. Too often do we see that struggle within ourselves.

Micah says today, "He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Too much of our modern discourse revolves around the need to not ruffle feathers and to avoid stepping on toes while only accepting victory and the humiliating defeat of our enemies.

But are we willing to sacrifice the just and the kind and even our walk with God to do so? How often do we demand that which is good and right from our friends when we know that they are in the wrong? How often do we show compassion and mercy to our opponents even when they have never showed any to us? How often do we walk humbly with God as he walks us away from that which is easy or that which we want for ourselves apart from what he has in store for us?

You see convictions are only as significant as a willingness to act upon them. When our friends agree with us, the conversation is easy and results agreeable. But when we disagree with our friends, the conversation becomes difficult, the results unsure. We ask ourselves which relationship is more important: God or man? In theory, the answer comes to us easily, in practice perhaps not so much.

It is a choice that stands before us at odds with the world of the senses, the world of proof, where "Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we" like Paul "preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles." The cross does not make sense as the instrument of life, and yet through it is our "life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption."

The kingdom then is not what we want or what we make of it. It is what it is. It is what God has commanded it to be. It is where the poor in spirit inherit the kingdom of heaven, and those who mourn are comforted. It is where the meek inherit the earth and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are satisfied. It is where the merciful obtain mercy, and the pure in heart see God. It is where the peacemakers are called sons of God, and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake receive the kingdom of heaven. The trouble is that we think it is somewhere else, sometime else, so that we may even on occasion act like it is someone else.

But the message of Jesus was and is this: "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." It is a kingdom which is folly to those around us because it is predicated on a truth. And that truth is this: through the cross life rises from death. And that life has a name, Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. It is so inconceivable that they can scarcely contain their laughter or pity or scorn or malice. In those times, we remember the one part of the beatitudes directed at us all, "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you."

If we are truly in Christ, then we will glory in his cross, and gladly suffer shame and loss for that which we claim by faith. So "Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord" in season and out, before friend and foe, that the balance of our lives may demonstrate that we love the praise of God more than the praise of men. Let us pray that more people would take up the foolishness of God, that more people would trip over the folly of the Cross. Maybe then, they can stop, take a good look at it, and see.