

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany - Year A

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Micah 6:1-8

Psalm 15

I Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 5:1-12

02/02/2020

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew:

1When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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

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

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

7“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Foolishness

Good morning! I'll be the first to admit that pastors are human, and that we sometimes make mistakes, but in today's second reading Paul goes against common sense and basically insults the church in Corinth. Can you imagine what would happen if I wrote a letter to the congregation saying that God could work with anything, especially what the rest of the world would consider foolish, to accomplish God's will? Take a listen again: *“26Consider 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. 27But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29so that no one might boast in the presence of God. 30He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31in order*

that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’¹ I mean, I get his point, I just think there’s a more tactful way to go about things than saying that the congregation was un-intelligent, weak, and of bad birth.

Paul’s point is much larger than the inadequacies of the congregation: *“18The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” 20Where 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? 21For 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. 22For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”*² The good Lutherans in the room should be connecting dots with Martin Luther’s theology of the cross. Luther’s theology, which we see illustrated in Paul’s letter, is best understood as God using what could be seen as weak by the world to accomplish strength. It argues that the cross of Christ is where God illustrates God’s strength. This theology of the cross is contrasted with the world’s theology of glory, which places the power on human reason or human pride and power.

¹ I Corinthians 1:26-31

² I Corinthians 1:18-25

Here is an example if you're confused. Let's take church attendance. A theology of glory would say that the higher the attendance, the greater the number worshipping, the better things are going. A theology of the cross recognizes that just showing up doesn't mean much if the message isn't true. Or how about the example of power. A theology of glory would argue that the most powerful are the ones who show the most strength, survival of the fittest. A theology of the cross says to turn the other cheek.

So when we hear the words from the second reading today we can begin to understand the radical nature of the cross. In the first century the cross was a symbol of power, but in a different way. The cross was an example of the power that Rome had over those that they ruled. The cross was the tool that was used to enforce that *pax romana* that we have all heard about. The cross was so brutal a tool that little is actually written about it because it was considered bad taste to even talk about it. Powerful people don't end up on crosses, they put others on crosses, a theology of glory would argue. Except the Christians ran into a problem. They hung our savior on a cross... how could that be possible? Messiahs didn't end up on the cross, criminals did!

But the death couldn't hold back God, and three days later Jesus was raised from the dead. Somehow, God used the last thing we would expect to show God's strength. The early Christians scratched their heads and tried to figure it all out. It was then that what Jesus taught started to come back to them, lessons like today's Gospel reading:

“3“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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Jesus had been talking about power through weakness since the very beginning!

But we human beings are fickle creatures, and it becomes very easy for us to be seduced by the shine and look of the theology of the glory, and so we have constantly needed a reminder. Which is exactly what Paul does in the first letter of Corinthians, it’s what St. Augustine fought for in the early church, it’s what Martin Luther did in the 1500’s, it’s what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace in the 1930’s and 1940’s, and it’s what I’m telling you now in 2020. Now, you might ask who I am to compare myself to such illustrious company. I am just a fool, not wise, not strong, and of a questionable bloodline, but hey, God’s worked with less before. Amen.

³ Matthew 5:3-12