

The Discomfort of the Gospel

February 23, 2014

READ 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Right after his greeting, Paul launches into this first letter to the church at Corinth by chastising the leaders of the church for their internal divisions, which was a leadership problem. Some of these leaders seem to have forgotten their place. The people had begun to think they were following this or that leader, rather than being led by that leader to Christ. But the passage we just read is directed to a particular criticism of the content of their teaching and preaching, specifically that some of them were preaching a gospel that did not include the uncomfortable reality of Jesus Christ crucified on the cross.

They were dodging the truth of the cross and skipping right to the Resurrection, apparently because the cross seemed foolish to them – foolish to preach about the Son of God beaten and bloody and dying the most undignified death imaginable in that time. It was an ugly picture, and it hardly seemed befitting to talk about God in that picture at all. The cross made them uncomfortable and they just did not want to talk about it.

We know, like Paul knew, that the cross was not the only aspect of the life and ministry of Jesus that made people uncomfortable. If you just start paging through any of the Gospels, it will not take you many pages to find somebody set to squirming because of something Jesus did or said. Just do a few off the top of your head:

- Jesus made Herod uncomfortable just by being born, and Herod never even saw Him.
- He made the people at the synagogue in His hometown uncomfortable by proclaiming Himself the fulfillment of prophesy. Pretty cheeky for the local carpenter's son; even more uncomfortable for them because He said it with an authority that they had not experienced before.
- Jesus made the teachers of the Law and the religious leadership uncomfortable by challenging their interpretations of Scripture. They were certainly not used to that.

- He made people who thought they were doing the right things uncomfortable by challenging their motivations. How could they go wrong with following the letter of the law, no matter why they were doing it?
- Jesus made Nicodemus uncomfortable with the concept of being born again. Why would someone so learned and accomplished as Nicodemus want to start over?
- He made the “rich, young ruler” uncomfortable by confronting him with his priorities. His things were more important to him than following Jesus, and he squirmed inside because he knew he was wrong.
- Jesus made His disciples uncomfortable when He started talking about His death. They simply did not want to hear it. They had just started to figure out what He was talking about – to understand what it meant for Him to be the Messiah – and talk about suffering and dying just did not fit that picture. It was a discomfort with the cross that sounds a lot like what Paul was addressing in the church at Corinth.
- He made the disciples uncomfortable when He washed their feet. They did not understand the nature of servanthood, or that servanthood was to be their model for living.
- Jesus made Pilate uncomfortable, because he was confronted with the truth and did not know what to do with it.

The truth is that Jesus Christ should make us uncomfortable, too. When we really pay attention to who He was, and the life of perfect relationship with God that He lived and showed us how to live, it should make us seriously uncomfortable to realize how far our own lives are from that model. The moment that discomfort really gets to us is called conviction, and if any of us has never been there, we should worry because it means we are deluding ourselves about who we are and about our relationship with God. Conviction should cause us to seek comfort, which is found in only one place – the mercy and forgiveness and grace of God. Jesus Christ is the deliverer of the ultimate comfort, and the only comfort that matters when our conviction overtakes us.

Some years ago, one Saturday morning, a couple of people from an area church knocked on our door to invite us to church with them. My response was that we were already active members of a church, and I remember saying that we were very comfortable there. They didn't take that for an answer, and it was years later before I understood why. If the best thing you can say about your place in the church is that you are comfortable there, something important is missing. God did not call us to this church or any church to be comfortable or complacent; God calls us to the church so we can grow in faith and grace and mission. We should never be comfortable with where we are spiritually, because God is not. Those folks at our door were right to keep knocking.

But back to the Corinthians.

The truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ was still making people uncomfortable years after the death and Resurrection of Jesus, because the truth included the cross. I suspect that many of us are just as uncomfortable with the cross as they were. We would much rather skip right from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday and the Resurrection – just fast-forward through the betrayal, kangaroo court, beating, public rejection, and crucifixion. We would rather our vision of the cross be a beautiful lighted beacon on a mountain top, a not a bloody piece of wood.

The cross makes us uncomfortable because we can't help putting ourselves in one of those crowds and wondering what we would have been doing. We like to think our voice would have just been drowned out by the crowd shouting for the release of Barrabas, when we called out "Release Jesus!" There are all kinds of places in that great drama for us to find ourselves, and it pains us to think that we could have been silent or even gone along with the crowd.

It also makes us uncomfortable for what must have been one of the reasons the wise people of Corinth thought it foolishness – it highlights the suffering of Jesus on our behalf. Paul makes some broad generalizations in verse 22: the "Jews demand miraculous signs and the Greeks look for wisdom" as conditions for their belief. The Jews could not imagine a suffering servant as the model of the Messiah. The Greeks

wanted a message that made sense, as they defined making sense. Neither of them could be satisfied by a Gospel that included the Son of God crucified.

Yet that is the truth. It does not matter what we think of its logic or wisdom – it is the truth and it convicts humanity – it convicts us. The cross shows us how low we can go, putting a perfectly innocent man to death because He dared to tell the truth. The cross shows us the worst of humanity, faced willingly by Jesus because He loves us.

In the same instant that the cross reveals the worst of humanity, it also reveals the depth of love for us that God demonstrated in this sacrifice. It could only be love that would have God do what He did for people like that – for people like us. The wisdom of the world thinks that is foolishness – we've done nothing to deserve a love like that from Almighty God. But the truth is that the wisdom of the world is a failure – it has failed to make the world better, it has failed to make any of us better; it has failed to get us any closer to salvation or right relationship with God. Trying to package the Gospel of Christ crucified into something that will be recognized and accepted by the wisdom of the world is doomed to the same failure. The wisdom of the world cannot understand the cross and counts it foolishness. The wisdom of the world cannot account for grace.

We are compelled by our salvation to deliver the whole truth of the Gospel to the world, including the parts we are not all that crazy about. It is not very flattering to us to deliver the message of the cross because of what it reveals about us. We also understand that when we deliver a message that the world sees as foolishness, we will be considered foolish ourselves. The people of Galilee probably thought the original twelve were foolish, following this fellow Jesus all over the place. Are we willing to risk being thought foolish for our faith?

We are called to a great many things if we understand the call to discipleship in Christ. We do not often think about being called to foolishness, but here it is. Paul challenged the Corinthians, and challenges us, to deliver the message of the cross, no matter what we or the world think of that message, because the cross is the truth, and it convicts us just as if we had been there. This is a challenge that is part of the call to

discipleship – a call to taking risks in deepening our own discipleship and to taking risks to bring others to the knowledge of the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Peter told Jesus in the Upper Room that he would die for Him. If Jesus had asked Peter to do that, he just might have. But that was not what Jesus wanted from Peter. Jesus had something else in mind for Peter. Jesus did not want Peter to die for Him; He wanted Peter to live for Him.

Jesus calls us to live for Him. To live for Him as true disciples, with a depth of faith and dependence on Him that gives us the courage to take risks, to be thought foolish, to live life with the joy of the redeemed, which the world will not understand but will want to know about. Salvation by way of the cross may make perfect sense to us because we are here. But it really doesn't make sense – it really does sound like foolishness – to people who only know wisdom in worldly terms. It is up to us as disciples of Christ to show the world why it makes sense to follow Jesus Christ, crucified but risen. This does not mean that we are all called to dancing in the streets or preaching in the fields. But it does mean that we are called to get out of our comfort zones, to take risks – personal risks – in the service of the Lord, and to do all that in the assurance of our salvation and without fear. God does not call us to be comfortable or complacent. He calls us to discipleship, to following Him no matter the cost. God calls us to live for Him, without fear, as His true disciple.

We are all called to that discipleship, whether the world thinks us foolish or not. It is for us to tell the story of the Jesus who gave it all on the cross, His body and blood given for the forgiveness of your sins, for your salvation – foolishness to the world but salvation to those who believe. We are all called to that discipleship that makes salvation real and personal and defining of who we are, all the time, every day. We are all called to that discipleship that cannot rest until the world knows the truth of the Gospel. You are called to that discipleship, I am called to that discipleship, and there is no rest, no comfort, no peace anywhere else. That call is real, it is personal, and it rings as clearly right now as it did from Jesus on the cross.

Amen