

THE WISDOM OF GOD

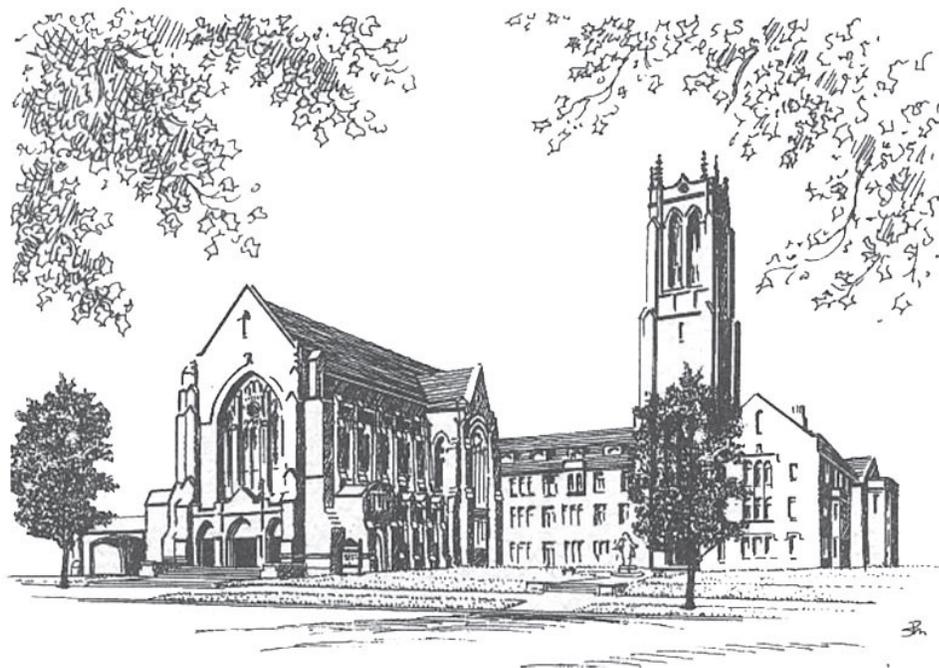
by

Rev. Thomas A. (Tommy) Williams

January 29, 2017

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street

Houston, Texas 77004-6917

713-528-0527

www.stpaulshouston.org

Texts: Micah 6:1-8 • Psalm 15 • 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 • Matthew 5:1-12

Micah 6:1-8

Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.

“O my people, what have I done to you?

“In what have I wearied you?

“Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.

“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?

“Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

“Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?

“Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

He has told you, O mortal, 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?

Psalm 15

O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?

Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart;

who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;

in whose eyes the wicked are despised, but who honor those who fear the Lord; who stand by their oath even to their hurt;

who do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent. Those who do these things shall never be moved.

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

Where 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?

For 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. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Consider 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. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Matthew 5:1-12

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Blessed are you when people 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 in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Jean Vanier was born in Switzerland in 1928. His father was a big wig in the Canadian military and diplomatic corps, and Jean trained to be a naval officer himself. After witnessing the trauma of war as a young person, Jean turned toward a life of prayer, and eventually he left a promising career in the military, believing that only community — communities of people who understood how much they needed one another, how much their own lives depended on grace and the goodness of each other — only community could bring about healing in this world.

In the late 60’s he began the L’Arche movement, which has grown into a network of Christian communities all across the globe where able-bodied people and disabled persons live together as families and see in one another their own gifts and weaknesses, and the face of Christ.

Jean Vanier's story relates directly to the story of the Corinthian church that was read for us this morning. First Corinthians is a letter written from a pastor, Paul, to a church he started only a few years before in Corinth.

This letter may be especially helpful to us Christians here in 2017. Corinth was not so different from Houston. As scholar Craig Kocher points out, Corinth sat on the coast, "at the confluence of great land and sea trade routes. Corinth was a city of diversity, of ambition filled with ambitious people, a buzz of economic growth and upward mobility at the center of first century Rome, one of the world's first great superpowers."

"And in the midst of this city was the young Corinthian church, filled with CEO types and slaves, scholars and students, trade people and fishers." Corinth was a city of medicine, research, and industry.

And it is clear from the topics Paul is addressing in the letter that it was also a church full of personality and opinion. If the people of the Corinthian church were around today, they would all be tweeting their opinions on the hour so that all of us would be well informed of the latest thoughts passing through their minds.

Corinth was a diverse and promising place but clearly also a deeply broken one, which is not so different from this or any community. Frustration and in-fighting had grown at the church.

Kocher again interprets that "Paul tries to address some of the challenges in the church, about when and who should eat meat, about the meaning of the Lord's supper, about the gifts of the Spirit, the work of the cross, the triumph of love, and the diversity of the body of Christ."

After a few opening lines Paul launches into a call for unity. It seemed they were increasingly placing faith in their social status, their job titles, their intellect, the number of friends on their Facebook page, and the Dow Jones.

They were trying to force their doctrinal opinions on one another. And Paul says to them that unity does not come by force of will or skilled debate, but through the grace of Christ, grace revealed through our need for one another, our dependence on one another, especially those in our midst who are the weakest in the body.

Jesus was not crucified, writes Paul, for one person or one issue. Rather, in his crucifixion and resurrection Jesus draws together the whole body of Christ.

The rest of Corinth's bourgeoisie elite might call it foolishness, but Paul says that for us who are being saved, the cross, and he whose body was laid upon it, is the power of God.

The message of the cross, its power for transformation and reconciliation, is and has always been most beautiful and most loving when revealed through the weakness of real lives, in that moment when we recognize our deep need for one another.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his classic book on Christian community, *Life Together* said, "In a Christian community, everything depends upon whether each individual is an indispensable link in a chain. Only when even the smallest link is securely interlocked is the chain unbreakable. Every Christian community must realize that not only do the weak need the strong, but also that the strong cannot exist without the weak. The elimination of the weak is the death of the fellowship."

Anyone who has ever tied something together or has used a chain together understands that if the thinnest strand of that rope breaks, the whole thing breaks apart. Quite obviously the weakest link in a chain breaks the whole chain.

We can't live in isolation from one another even if we wanted to.

Paul's writing is to the church internally to the church at Corinth but the entire Christian Gospel is meant to show the world the way we should live together. Christian community rightly lived is the way we should live together as a nation and a world.

I played high school basketball. I've heard it said and it is true that in basketball, as with all team sports, the most talented teams rarely win championships.

Successful teams highlight the gifts of each player. They count on one another in particular ways at particular times; that's the beauty of being a part of a team.

And on the very best teams, players aren't afraid for their weaknesses to be exposed, because their weakness reveals a need for another's gift.

Weakness and foolishness are two key words in the gospel lexicon. They should not be confused with being trampled on, or false humility, or unnecessary piety. Rather, Paul says, the cross, that brutal tool used by the Romans to inflict death and humiliation, is the source of God's redemption.

Crucified ones are all around us. Through the pained faces of the couples whose marriages are fracturing. Through the ones addicted and abused, those bullied and forgotten, the trafficked and hungry, and the children who need us to witness for them or no one will.

They are in a sense crucified ones in our communities – pain inflicted on them either by their own doing or another's and Jesus died for them and us.

Our church, our city, our nation, is incomplete the apostle Paul essentially says, we need the crucified ones in our midst to make us truly the church.

All of us have broken places in us. All of us know what it is to need healing.

All across your lives and mine and all across our world is wreckage. And the strange and wonderful promise of the Gospel of Jesus is that in the person and witness of Jesus all of it is healed and redeemed. It was redeemed in his own death on the cross, it is an ongoing redemption happening now whenever Christian communities gather and engage in works of mercy and justice in the name of that Jesus.

None of us can do it alone.

In L'Arche communities, that network of Christian communities started by Jean Vanier, disabled persons and able-bodied persons share their homes and meals, they pray together and hope together, and care for one another as family, and the words "able" and "disabled" are not nearly as significant as brother, sister, friend, child.

They discover in their life together that they all have gifts and they all have weaknesses, and they need each one around the table.

Matthew's Gospel proclaims a kind of wisdom when Jesus blesses the "weak" and gives them the keys to the kingdom.

These beatitudes, as they are known, are hard for us to embrace.

New Testament scholar Alyce McKenzie says about these blessings what most of us more practically believe:

“Blessed are the self-reliant (not the poor in spirit), the cheerful (not those who mourn), the bold (not the meek), the proactive and the ambitious (not those who hunger and thirst for righteousness), blessed are those who demand to be treated fairly (not the merciful), those with a single, driving ambition (not the pure in heart), blessed are those who stand up for themselves (not the peacemakers), those who have a high quality of life (not the persecuted), and blessed are those who have a good reputation (not those who are reviled and slandered).”

These blessings reorient us to the wisdom of God, a power made perfect in what seems like weakness and vulnerability.

In Spanish the beatitude or blessedness is translated *bienaventuranza*, literally “good adventure to you.” We all know that adventure means risk, the courage to defy the odds, the refusal to play it safe.

A life that honors the weak and vulnerable and a church that does the same takes courage. A life of blessing, a life of Godly wisdom means adventure.

Rev. Jorge Lara-Braud translated these beatitudes with this translation inserted:

“Good adventure to you whose hearts are genuinely with the poor: you are under God’s protective rule. Good adventure to you who are without power: the whole world shall be yours. Good adventure to you who are hungry and thirsty for justice: your cup will be filled. Good adventure to you who look for truth with singleness of heart: you shall see God. Good adventure to you who work for peace: you shall be called children of God. Good adventure to you who are persecuted for the sake of justice. You, too, are already under God’s protective rule; rejoice, be very happy, when others say evil things about you falsely because you are mine. God is preparing a great reward for you. Don’t be surprised, prophets have always been an endangered species. (Trans. by J.L-B)

Dear friends, it is never too early or too late to choose the life of beatitude, to reorient one's life around the wisdom of God.

Should you choose to live that way, I offer you on the authority of Jesus and it will be the beginning of a good adventure that no one or no force can take away from you, not even death itself. A life of wisdom and hope cannot be penetrated.

Why not try it?

Good adventure to you! Amen.