



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON
3-11-12

I can't imagine that it did much good for Jesus to wipe out the money changers and dove salesmen. I'd guess those guys were back in business the next day. So why did he do it? Why did he put all that energy into a dramatic act that produced no lasting change? It seems foolish. And couple that with the fact that his actions did not help the growing case against him in the minds of the Pharisees and those in command. It all was working together for his crucifixion – his death on a cross.

And then here we are today – proclaiming/preaching Christ crucified. And that doesn't make much sense either. To be crucified was a sure sign of criminality, an offense to respectable people. When society at large sees the cross, it sees nothing but shame or perhaps some foolish people hanging there. It's not a place of pride.

So what are we doing preaching Christ crucified? Paul tells us that we are proclaiming a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. I'd say that's probably true – still true today. As much as we take for granted that the cross is our religious symbol to show our Christian faith; and while the cross is certainly an accepted item for jewelry and decoration in homes and churches – I'd guess that if we REALLY preached a message of Christ crucified today – we'd be seen as fools.

Who'd want to follow a man so determined to irritate most everyone who has any sort of power?
Who'd want to follow a man intent of behaving in a way that guaranteed his probable arrest and sentence of death?

Who'd want to follow a man that behaved and spoke mysteriously and strangely – so that you hardly ever understood what he was saying?

Who'd want to follow a man accepting of being humiliated and tortured and ridiculed?

Who'd want to follow a man who gave you no sense of certainty?

How is God supposed to work with that sort of person?

This week John and I watched the movie “Of Gods and Men.” It's a movie I would recommend to each of you. It's a movie that would be powerful to show during Holy Week.

This true story is about eight Trappist monks from France who have spent many years living in a monastery located in an extremely poor village in the mountainous area of Algeria. During a period of tense uprisings of Islamist terrorists in the late 1990's, the monks found their lives to be

in peril. Terrorists threatened them, the army threatened them, and government officials tried actively to deport them back to France. After their first experience with a terrifying visit from a guerrilla group of fighters, the monks began to question leaving the place.

At their first group meeting the vote was split about whether to stay or go. Each monk was struggling with their own fear and uncertainty of what God might want in the situation. Over many months each monk worked out their salvation with fear and trembling. They wrote letters to loved ones describing their situation and their struggle to know what was right.

Each passing day the danger to their lives increased. But in a sermon preached by Abbott Christian, the head of the group, he spoke about how they faced the danger. Each day they went on living. They cared for their bees and sold the honey. They kept open their medical clinic and visited with their neighbors. They tended their gardens and made their meals and shared their produce. They went to village celebrations and counseled the villagers. They worshipped – day and night. They cared for each other as they aged and questioned and fought together. And during all of that time they were being formed, formed into who they wished to be, formed into who they already were.

After many months they took another vote about leaving and the choice was unanimous that they stay. As one monk stated – they had chosen to follow in Christ's footsteps years before. They had chosen to love their neighbors – all of them. They had chosen to live with and care for the least, the last, and the lost. They had chosen to live a life that did not make sense to others, especially those in power. They had chosen to proclaim Christ crucified.

After their murder, a letter was found written by Abbott Christian. He knows his death might be near and he writes a message to all who will read it - assuring them that while the monks' actions will appear naïve or ridiculous to those on the outside, to Christian, they are a sign of hope, a sign of relationship with all of creation, a sign of humility and love and steadfastness with the assurance of the most beautiful future ahead.

Author Barbara Brown Taylor has written – “In Jesus it is possible to see what right relationship with God and neighbor looks like. It looks like justice. It looks like compassion. It looks like life lived in a covenant of ferocious, saving love.”

To some it will look foolish.

Thanks be to God.

“In (Jesus) him, it is possible to see what right relationship with God and neighbor looks like. It looks like justice. It looks like compassion. It looks like life lived in a covenant of ferocious, saving love.” Barbara Brown Taylor, “Speaking of Sin”

“Repentance begins with the decision to return to relationship: to accept our God-given place in community, and to choose a way of life that increases life for all members of that community.” Barbara Brown Taylor, “Speaking of Sin”

“A fundamental message of the cross is that God can work even in the context of humiliation, torture, loss, and death. When society at large sees the cross, it sees nothing but shame. When “those who are being saved” see the cross, they know more is at work than degradation. In fact, God may find the best opportunity for growth, meaning, and connection right at the point of brokenness. Beuchner notes how different this is from many other religious traditions” “A six-pointed star, a crescent moon, a lotus – the symbols of other religions suggest beauty and light. The symbol of Christianity is an instrument of death. It suggests, at the very least, hope.” K.C. Hanson, commentary on the season of Lent.