



"The Missionary God"

a sermon by

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Our scripture lesson this morning comes from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians chapter 1, beginning in verse 18

“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.”

Talk with any mission team from the United States that has returned from an experience anywhere in the world, and invariably you will hear it said from at least one of the members, “I know that I received more than I gave.” This has been the resounding sentiment of the groups from our congregation. Which seems strange because, really, when you total it up, these people give a lot. It takes money to go on a mission trip. It takes time. It takes energy in the planning and travel. It takes a great deal of physical resources- building supplies, donated items, educational materials, vaccinations and then there is the cost of being absent from family and loved ones for a week or ten full days when full days with the family are precious and few. There is emotional wear and tear from overuse.

But when you total up the cost of all these things they gave and ask most anyone who has ever been, they will more than likely tell you that they feel like these are mere triflings- almost purely incidental- when held in comparison to the bounty they received. And why? That's the question. Why? Because let me tell you when you're on the experiential end of this phenomenon, when you're the one counting up the costs and feeling like you have come up far short by comparison to what you have received, there isn't any more clarity on the other side. Our Haiti mission team this past November sat around the kitchen table and a bare light bulb for hours struggling to put their finger on exactly why this is so.

There are plenty of surface level reasons why this might be the case. It could be modesty, but probably not. It could be embarrassment because we are wealthy- really, radically, obscenely wealthy relative to most of the world and so we want to try and diminish our contribution and draw a little attention away from ourselves. This is a more than legitimate issue to wrestle with. But I think that what is at the heart of the 'why' can be answered in part at least, by our text today. And not because mission work puts those of us at the top of the global economic ladder in contact with those at the very bottom and that makes us feel ashamed - and make no mistake, if you woke up with a roof over your head, ate a meal or expect one shortly, and got into a car to get here this morning or conceivably could have- you're at the top.

No, I don't think the answer is that straightforward. I think it is much more profound though considerably less complex. In so many ways this is not a text for our time. Standing here on Superbowl Sunday and looking ahead to Super Tuesday this is probably the most counterintuitive message we could possibly hear particularly in a week when everyone has their sights set on proving themselves- to showcasing their wisdom, their strength. I can't imagine that this text will be read or prayed over in either locker room before the game tonight. It certainly won't find its way into any campaign slogan. This week is about strength and wisdom, whose got the most of it, and how will it be used? Can we count on it? Can we bet our money on it? What about our future?

But this text was no less counterintuitive in Paul's day. It was shocking, really. The community in Corinth was as ravenous for power and influence and prestige as our culture is today, only for them- for this Greco-Roman community, it was power attained through wisdom and fancy rhetoric that ruled the day. Sages put their wisdom on display compelling the crowds and winning what they were willing to give which was respect, status, and therefore power. But Paul looks out across all this earthly and utterly transient power- and he holds up the cross. The cross- that represents shame and degradation, the antithesis of influence, and death. And he says this weakness will shame the strong. This folly- this thing so subject to ridicule- that which is ridiculous- the ultimate insult to deliver in the age of the Philosophers- this folly that is the cross, would shame the wise. So that no one might boast in the presence of God.

And why? Because it is only the cross that saves.

It is one of the great paradoxical tensions of our faith. This ultimate symbol of humiliation and shame and rejection and defeat is God's power because salvation is won by God's gift of Jesus Christ alone, not by human giftedness or strength. It was God's greatest weakness- his mortality- that brought the world to its knees. It is scandalous because there is nothing more unlikely than redemption coming from someone who died on a cross. Paul said some wanted wisdom, others wanted signs. But instead God gave himself by embodying not strength, not wisdom, but total vulnerability. Despite what they thought they needed the people got the surprising, completely powerless self-giving love of Jesus- and that changed the world forever. So you can see then what it means that weakness shamed the strong. Paul's greatest concern for the people was one of perspective.

For in this culture it was so easy for the people to forget that they needed God. The atmosphere was so charged with self determination and the exultation of one's gifts and capabilities that they ran the dangerous risk of forgetting that the most important thing in their lives was not what they possessed but how they were redeemed. What counted was not what they knew, but by whom they were known. The issue was not what they could do for themselves, but what God had done for them in Jesus Christ. And it had been accomplished not through the things we prize the most- but by that which we desire probably the least. And that is vulnerability.

It is not only equally counterintuitive for us to hear this message, but I think deep down it is also utterly terrifying for us to hear that it was vulnerability that had the power to transform and to save. No wonder this Word is considered scandalous- it makes people incensed. We spend a lot of time, energy, and money fortifying ourselves against being vulnerable to so many things- to other people, to the outside world, to illness- is it so difficult to imagine that we also build up a shell around ourselves that ultimately keeps us from being vulnerable to God and therefore unable to be changed by him?

When we were in Russia two years ago a few of us waited in the hallway of the church as people streamed in for a fellowship gathering that was about to take place when a young woman walked in with a baby carrier. The members of our group that stood there got excited because this was a beloved member of the church that one in our group had known from years prior, and the community had already been abuzz with the fact that she and her husband had just recently delivered their first child. We'd been hearing about this baby for quite a while. Everyone was all smiles as the members of their church and our group that were standing there greeted her warmly and peered in to the carrier at the little girl. One of the members of our team, a nurse, said, "oh, she's so beautiful, would it be all right if I held her?" At this the mother stopped and got quiet and her affect became totally flat. "We try not ever to hold her," she said. "Because we do not want her to get used to being touched. She will not have this in her life."

In so many ways we have lost our imagination for what life can be like when we allow ourselves to be touched by God. In our need to control our worlds and to live by the doctrine of self-sufficiency we have built walls around ourselves that have kept God and others at a distance and under our finger, and have grown to expect so little of our faith and one another because we refuse to allow ourselves to be touched and therefore will most certainly never be moved. So sure we're quite comfortable with that familiar missional charge of Christ- "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..." But what about the activity of our missionary God? Who did not give signs. Who did not use power. But who gave himself. Who became totally vulnerable and let transformation happen on the cross at the moment of his own deepest suffering and need.

We tend to be profoundly uncomfortable with this notion of mission because if we're going to truly follow after Christ in this way and allow our lives to be touched by God then that means we have to be willing to risk. And taking risks means potentially being confronted with a need that we cannot fill for ourselves. And that is, after all, our

greatest fear, isn't it? That we or our families will have needs that cannot be met regardless of all our wisdom, our strength, our preparation for the future and hard work?

But that's the thing about mission work- in it you are stripped of all the mechanisms of controlling your world and other people, of every way that you understand yourself to be useful, sometimes even of your ability to construct meaning through language and are therefore made totally vulnerable and left to face a multitude of needs that you cannot fill. And that is the point that Paul is making. That regardless of what we think we are capable of- regardless of who we think we are- we are totally vulnerable and all that we have is need that we cannot fill. But it is only when we come to recognize this fact that we are driven to the foot of the cross. And only there when we are confronted with our powerlessness, confronted with our inability, confronted with our need can we truly understand the gift of God in Jesus Christ whose power alone it is to save.

A friend and colleague of mine once took a group of college students from Vanderbilt on a mission trip to Mexico City. He said that on Sunday the group of students, all starched and pressed and in their most dignified Sunday dress filed into a Catholic church in the midst of this filthy, impoverished city and took their place in the pew. He said that as mass began the priest took out the elements, blessed and consecrated them and invited the people to come forward to receive the sacrament. The students watched in amazement as row after row the congregants from the slums of the city came forward to receive the host with tears streaming down their faces. "Why are they crying?" One of the students asked. "They're crying," my friend answered, "because it's real." They wept not because their life was so hard. Not because of all the sorrow they'd seen. It was tears of joy that were being shed because Christ to them was so very real.

'We received much more than we gave.' They say. And why is that? God chose what is weak in this world to shame the strong. The people in Haiti who may not eat for the better part of a week, or our friends in Russia who literally risk their lives for their faith, the villagers who walk 3 miles to get to a fresh water source in the Yucatan, our friends in the Gulf Coast who are still to this day left homeless and broke in the wake of Katrina all they have are needs that they cannot possibly fill. And yet their worship is louder, more jubilant than anything you have ever heard. Their love for God is so profound and the object of their faith so perfectly clear because Christ to them is so very real. And the gift we receive that feels like it eclipses anything that we gave- the one that our friends around the globe give by simply following in the footsteps of our missionary God and offering themselves- is the truth that Christ is real for them, and that he can be real for us too.

What we come to learn from those who face poverty in faith every day is that all of our material abundance prevents us from seeing the shocking depth of our spiritual need. And that every instinct to control our world is utter futility in the face of life. And yet- and yet- God chose what is weak to shame the strong- for in the midst of all this there is the cross that says God does provide. In vulnerability. In need. Over and in abundance in Jesus Christ God provides himself fully. Our missionary God meets us all where we are

and pours out all that he has in love for us so that we will know that having Christ in our lives means that we have enough.

Every week my good friend and brother in the faith Pastor Pavel in Russia gets death threats on his life. Did you know that he prays for us every day? Each day Actionnel in Bayonnais, who wept when he found out that there were such things as veterinarians in this country because there are not enough doctors for people in Haiti, who looks out across his congregation and does not see a single family who has not known the death a child or parent due to starvation or its complications, each day he has to make choices about whether he will pay his teachers or feed his students or provide for his family and yet he prays for God to be with the churches in Charlotte and all over North Carolina every day. Not so that we'll give more money, but so that we will know Jesus in our midst and so that we will be blessed.

The great misconception about Global mission is that it is only about going out and seeing what we can do for others. But in reality, it is about all of us- together- school children in Haiti and churchgoers in Charlotte, North Carolina, former homeowners in the Gulf Coast and believers in every corner of God's kingdom being confronted with that which we cannot do for ourselves. And together being driven to the feet of our Lord. In our affluence and in our perceived power and control we tend to treat practicing our faith in Jesus Christ as though it is merely a means of rounding out an otherwise healthy, balanced lifestyle. But here is a news flash from our friends in poverty around the globe: Faith in Jesus Christ *is* life.

“Mission” is not a program of the church. It is our identity as a people of God who are completely vulnerable and filled with need but who have been touched and transformed by Jesus Christ, whose lives are shaped by his gospel and whose worship joyfully reflects a life of gratitude for the living, moving, Spirit of God in our collective midst. In his book, “Life Together,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that, “Because God has united us in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that life together with other Christians, not as those who make demands, but as those who thankfully receive. We thank God for what God has done for us. We thank God for giving us other Christians who live by God's call, forgiveness, and promise. We do not complain about what God does and does not give us; rather we are thankful for what God does give us daily. And is not what has been given us enough: other believers who will go on living with us through sin and need under the blessing of God's grace?”¹

It just so happened that during the course of our stay in Russia a few of us were invited to the home of the family of that newborn baby girl who would not be held. When we walked into their tiny apartment, the baby was laying alone in the middle of a mattress while the mother sat wooden but intensely alert in a chair on the other side of the room watching her daughter wiggle and squirm. We came in and sat down and after exchanging a few pleasantries the nurse on our team asked the mother if she had any

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 5: Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible (Augsburg Fortress Press, 1996), edited by [Geffrey B. Kelly](#). P. 36.

medical questions concerning her baby. The mother said that she had only one, and asked if there was anything to this thing she had heard about once called therapeutic massage. And the Holy Spirit opened up the opportunity for our nurse to say that why yes, actually, it is was very important, what a wonderful question. And she was given permission to pick up the child and began to rub her arms and her legs, and to massage her feet, talking all the while about how it improved circulation, caused muscles to develop strength, built up the immune system to help fight disease, and let the baby know that she was safe which was critical for her emotional health in adulthood. And as this tiny infant's face lit up with the contact, her mother's face lit up with the possibility that it was ok for her to touch her child, and not only that but that her child needed to be touched for life.

We need to be touched by God for life. But will we let down our walls and admit our need and surrender our control long enough to risk being touched and transformed by a God who is actually real? And who is the source of our life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Let anyone who boasts, boast in the Lord.

Amen.