

Riverside United Church

April 21, 2024

Scripture Lesson: Acts 18: 1-4 & 1 Corinthians 1: 10-18, 25

Acts 18: 1-4 - Paul in Corinth

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together - by trade they were tent makers. Every Sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.

Corinthians 1: 10-18, 25

Divisions in the Church

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.' Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

Christ the Power and Wisdom of God

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 God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

"Discerning Wisdom amidst Foolishness and Vice Versa"

In this season of Easter, we hear stories of the early church and how the disciples and followers of Jesus shared the resurrection news and promise. The book of Acts tells the stories of the acts of the apostles. We have skipped ahead in that book from last week and so we are now finished with Peter stories for awhile. We have moved onto the ministry of the Apostle Paul and so we have heard how he went to the Greek community of Corinth and we have heard words from the opening chapter of the first letter to the Corinthians. After Paul visited a community he continued to keep in touch through letters. It is unlikely that the letters to the early churches were organized by chapter and verse and it is likely that there some compilation of fragments of letters happened to produce what we read as the 1st and 2nd letters to the Corinthians.

I wonder what Paul would write to the church in the 21st century? I wonder if Paul would recognize the church in the 21st century?

As we read these writings of the early church, a couple of things are noteworthy to remember. First, the epistles are the earliest writings. The gospels are written 20-40 years later. The early church is energized

by the oral tradition of the stories of Jesus and the accounts of his death and resurrection. Second, the early church was a movement within Judaism; there is yet to be a distinction between the Christians and the Jews. There were some within Judaism who are following the Way of Jesus. It would be similar to different movements within Judaism today or different denominations within Christianity.

We hear in the Acts passage that the Jews have been expelled from Rome by Claudius who was the Roman emperor from 41 to 54 CE. Some have landed in Corinth and we don't need to read between the lines to know that there is some conflict and division within the Corinth community of the early church. Paul writes:

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters."

I wonder if he would say similar words to the church of the 21st century? It is hard to imagine that Paul was naive enough to think that human beings could be of the same mind. In Acts we hear that he has been arguing in the synagogue trying to convince the Jews and Greeks. Does he imagine that following Christ is so transformative that there is agreement in the community? What would he think of the church in the 21st century?

Now there are church communities in our time that require or demand that everyone be of the same mind, that everyone sign on to the beliefs of the community. This expectation has caused church communities to split over theological and power differences.

In the tradition of the United Church, we don't have that expectation, or that same restriction of belief and so the result is that there is difference in how we understand God or Jesus or the Bible or the nature of humanity, etc. There are times when we are criticized for not having firm or fixed beliefs, and yet I celebrate that we focus more on having the same purpose than on having the same mind.

At Riverside we have defined our purpose as: *"With open minds and curious hearts, our commitment is to nourish our faith in God, as revealed in Jesus, to care for one another and to build partnerships of mutuality, respect and hope in our neighbourhood and beyond, as we worship, learn and serve together."*

Our vision is *"Living faithfully in the Spirit of Christ to make a loving difference in the world."*

We may have different ideas and opinions on what those words mean or how to live them, but that should enhance rather than hinder or diminish our sense of purpose.

Clarity of purpose also helps us to put into perspective the disagreements that may emerge.

The Apostle Paul seeks a clarity of purpose and focus for the Corinthian community. He challenges the sense of faction that has emerged in terms of who they follow - Apollos, Cephas, Christ. This seems more than differences in one's favourite theologian or leader. It is a deeper difference in terms of loyalty and commitment.

I wonder if Paul was writing to the 21st century church, who would be the factions of loyalty and commitment that he would be noticing. Would his "I follow ... listing include only religious leaders, or would he expand to other dimensions of thought and power? One of the challenges of living in our society and world is that there are lots of choices for gods; various options for what is most important to us, for who or what are we most loyal or committed?

In the last verse of the reading for today, we jump from verse 18 to 25 and it is an intense verse as there is a lot to ponder in these words:

“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 God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”

How do we as followers of Jesus, those who seek to belong to Christ, discern wisdom in a world where there is plenty of foolishness?

We can listen to the news and shake our heads in disbelief at stories of how ridiculous human priorities and rationale can be.

We can listen to the news and weep in lament at how often violence is the means of settling disputes. We can listen to the news and long for leadership to emerge to seek solutions to the large issues of our society: health care, housing, poverty. The pattern of partisan blaming and bickering sounds pretty foolish.

We live amidst a society that has the foolish conviction that we are what we have, and what we can acquire will determine happiness and be a measure of our value and worth.

We live on a planet whose balance is strained by the choices of humanity. We are realizing the foolishness of how we have pretended that we can have dominion in creation by doing whatever we want. As Earth Day approaches tomorrow, we are invited to live deeper into an alternative way of being partners in creation. And we need to move towards the wisdom of finding ways that each day is earth day because each day is a gift that God has given to us.

The litany of foolishness can go on and yet we are invited to absorb the Holy wisdom that can give us life, that can build community, that can offer good news into a world that is torn apart by division, by despair, by doubt that anything can be done to change the circumstances of our lives or the direction of the world.

The wisdom of God invites us to listen, to pay attention, to recognize how the Spirit of hope, of compassion, of justice is stirring in our community and world.

We are not accustomed to recognizing or naming things or activities as God being at work. We have explanations for most of what happens in our world. And yet, we are invited to trust that we can’t know or see or comprehend all that is at work. We are invited to listen to the voices who are not usually heard. We are invited to notice the connections being made across disciplines or divides of knowledge. We are invited to be asking the questions that give voice to longings and needs of ourselves and others.

We are invited to live with the trust and conviction of the story of the cross and empty tomb. We are invited to be Easter people - knowing that life emerges out of death, that light comes into the darkness and that hope is vital amidst the paralysis of despair and apathy.

And we know that those gifts and convictions, that trust will be lived out in many different ways by the diversity of humanity. Different faith paths teach similar vision and purpose. Different means of worship empower humanity to similar vision and purpose.

I think if the Apostle Paul were to observe the 21st century church - and religious mosaic - he would have words of encouragement and hope to offer, encouraging us to strive for same purpose - and recognizing that Holy wisdom is needed amidst human foolishness.

For the gift and promise of hope transcends time and context. Richard Bottt, who is the past Moderator of the United Church, has a gift for poetry and he is writing a poem a day in this National Poetry Month. I have his blessing to share the poem he wrote yesterday:

For some strange reason,
when the word "hope" is heard,
there is an ephemeral feeling
attached to it,
as if hope is a candle's flame,
always on the cusp of
guttering out.
Flickering.
Fleeting.
Dying.

But I've seen hope
in a protest march,
in the actions of people
standing against powers,
in the building of coalitions
that push against the principalities
of this world,
in the arms that wrap around,
and the bodies that fence between.

Hope is audacious.
Hope is diamond strong
and willow flexible.
Hope is the power
that acts when every action
seems impossible.
Hope is the tears that
purify the oceans,
and the laughter that
gives life to the air.

Where life is,
hope lives.

Amen