

“Not Foolproof”

Sermon on Sunday, March 7, 2021

Dear church,

Let's talk about the most recognizable symbol of our faith: the cross. It is, after all these years, still a mystery to me. I believe it will always remain that to some extent. Sure, we can boil down the meaning of the cross to easy formulas: Jesus died for our sins; God's love is revealed in the sacrifice of Christ; and other things like that. These answers are written in the Bible and taught in our churches; they are good teachings. Still, I feel and I have always felt that there is more to the cross than what meets the eye, more than we can even put into words or explain in teachings. During our Lenten journey, we are all encouraged to approach this holy symbol with curiosity and a sense of awe and wonder about the God who goes to such extremes. Rather than answers we seek a connection with Christ, the crucified. In that connection, Paul says, there is tremendous power. I believe that.

Over the last few weeks I have been reading a book by Jane Hawking, the first wife of the late physicist and famous celebrity scientist Stephen Hawking. She is a woman of faith, he was a confessing atheist; and that was just one of several fault lines in their marriage. As always when you get into a book, after a while you start feeling close to the characters, whether it's fiction or biography, it doesn't matter. You can almost predict what they might say or do. You participate in the plot. And so I imagine Stephen Hawking commenting on the cross and the Christian teaching of atonement. I can almost hear his voice through the machine that he used in later years to communicate, his vocal cords ravished by disease, and I can clearly hear him say, "rubbish!"

Paul said, the message of the cross is foolishness (that's the same as rubbish) to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. In defense of Stephen Hawking and others who have come so far in solving the riddles of the universe: this message about the cross comes out of left field. It is almost unfair to ask a scientist to "understand" the cross. I mean, how can the death of one person have meaning for all of us, thousands of years later? How can the blood of Christ atone for the sins of all of humanity? It sounds foolish. And it has always sounded foolish to the philosophers and scientists of the world, from the first century to the 21st.

Let's be clear: the central symbol of our faith will fool people. Ironically it will fool especially those who pride themselves in superior intellectual gifts and logical reasoning. Think of the movie "The Princess Bride." Think of the Sicilian character and criminal master mind Vizzini who is so self-assured about his intellectual prowess that he engages Wesley in a deadly game of reasoning, to his demise. I venture to say that Vizzini is so wicked smart that he would be totally fooled by the cross. Inigo Montoya on the other hand, the Spaniard who's out to avenge his father's murder, a character who is also a bit of a fool, he might get it. At least he knows pain. Which is helpful.

We can only gain insight into the mystery of the cross through prayer and meditation, not through dissertations or being smart. Once we spend time contemplating the cross, we may feel some of the pain God feels for his children and all their divisions, all the non-sense that we deal with, all the hurt that is going around. Once we spend time contemplating the cross, we may also begin to understand the depth of God's love. And we may come to experience peace, yes, peace in the midst of this crazy world, the notion that God is with us no matter what. And that's powerful!

Last week our prayer group got together via zoom, as we always do on the first Thursday of the month. While I love our group, to be honest, it can sometimes get a little bit depressing when you hear how the people we are praying for are suffering. Some people are in such a delicate state of health! They get treated for one thing and another ailment pops up. Or they are dealing with a chronic condition that no doctor really seems to be able to cure. I am not a crier, but I tell you sometimes tears flow in that group before we pray or while we pray. Because what some people go through is agony.

The message of the cross and the agony that Jesus himself experienced carries the following "foolishness": God identifies with your suffering; God is present in your suffering, God can even help you experience peace and freedom in the midst of it all. As human beings we have a tendency to try and solve people's problems; but we quickly find out that most of life's big problems are much more than we can handle. We may be able to alleviate some of the pain; we may be able to fix some of the smaller problems, but the bigger stuff? The bigger stuff is humbling. It teaches us that suffering is part of life in this world; only Christ and Christ crucified is big enough to be your rock and your anchor in the midst of it all. That's still a mystery, the deep mystery of the cross! Let us contemplate it some more. **Amen.**