

Lent 3-B
March 4-5, 2018
St. John's Cathedral

When I left the newsroom staff of the Tri-City Herald in 1984 to attend seminary in Berkeley, my colleagues gave me a gift in a small box: a Swiss Army knife. A note came with it: "This is for cutting through theological knots."

I thought about that knife this week while I was working my way through today's reading from First Corinthians. Like a lot of readings from the epistles, this one has some complicated twists and turns, punctuated by some memorable phrases like "Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world?" But hearing just this portion of the letter is a little like walking into the middle of a movie without a sense of what we had missed at the beginning.

What we're missing from the epistle is a clear context. What in the world is Paul writing about? And who were the recipients of this letter?

First of all, the church in Corinth was one of the earlier churches to be founded, and still in its formative stages. A lot of what we hear in First Corinthians is Paul wanting them to settle down a bit. He offers wise and prayerful counsel as well as blunt advice. There were some struggles in that church about leadership and also about their practice of the faith. Like all churches, they were a work in progress.

The congregation was also culturally complex. Some of the new believers had Jewish backgrounds. Others came from the Greek religions. Theologically they were a mixed bag as they embraced following the risen Christ.

There were also struggles in the congregation about power and status . Who had cultured speech and wealth? Was that more valuable? One of Paul's priorities was to level the playing field in the church – a community where everyone was equal and no one had a greater status based on wealth or background.

Those were just a few of the issues that were roiling around within that community as we walk into this part of their story.

The centerpiece of this, though, is a brief teaching about the cross. Paul muses on how the cross makes no sense except through the lens of faith in Jesus. Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase of this passage writes, “The message that points to Christ on the Cross seems like sheer silliness to those hell-bent on destruction, but for those on the way of salvation it makes perfect sense. It will turn conventional wisdom on its head.”

He adds that God's wisdom and mystery really override the wisdom of the present age, whether that is wisdom gleaned from education or absorbed from culture.

It's easy to see how the crucifixion would not be something easily embraced as a door to salvation and wholeness. Crucifixion was a public spectacle of capital punishment that was humiliating. It was a punishment for criminals. It was also a political statement. Those who challenged the rule of the Roman Empire would be punished in the most humiliating and degrading way.

The cross, the place where Jesus died, would be the last place you would expect God's self to be revealed. It looks like a place of weakness, not of strength. It

looks like a place of horror more than a place of honor. A place of despair, rather than a place of hope and life.

Of course Jesus' resurrection changed all of that -- transformed the cross into a sign of hope and life. But this might have been a tough sell in the prevailing culture in Corinth – and the prevailing wisdom of the early church. Paul says proclaiming Christ crucified is a “stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” Both groups struggled to make this work with their previous understanding of religious faith and practice.

That got me thinking about the struggle of our contemporary culture – not necessarily the culture of church, but our wider culture. Where do we find the message of peace and hope in the midst of this? What does the cross mean in this cultural moment? How is it a sign of hope?

I think if I were to describe the cultural moment in which we live right now, it would have to do with power, control, winning, and often discord. Sometimes it is hard to find the civility in our public discourse, which seems to be shrill and unyielding at times. On the worldwide stage there are escalating contests of power. In many parts of the world there are struggles for human rights. Sometimes this keeps us awake at night. Often we simply feel stuck, frustrated and despairing. Closer to home we try to sort all of this out and wonder what the future will bring. Like the Christians of Corinth, we live in uncertain times, but our contexts are different.

The teaching on the cross, though, has a constancy to it. No, on the surface it doesn't seem to make much sense, but through the lens of faith it is a source of hope because of what Jesus accomplished in that moment.

Here is how it makes sense to me. The cross brings about reconciliation and offers to us the possibility of continuing the work of reconciliation. The author of the letter to the Ephesians said that Jesus, through his cross, broke down the barrier of hostility by reconciling both sides.

I'm grateful to theologian Ronald Rolheiser for his powerful teaching on this. Let me share it with you:

"What Jesus did in his passion and death was to transform bitterness and division rather than to retransmit them and give them back in kind. In the love which he showed in his passion and death Jesus did this:

He took in hatred, held it inside himself, transformed it, and gave it back as love. He took in bitterness, held it, transformed it, and gave back graciousness. He took in curses, held them, transformed them, and gave back blessing. He took in paranoia, held it, transformed it, and gave back big-heartedness. He took in murder, held it, transformed it, and gave back forgiveness. And he took in enmity, bitter division, held it, transformed it, and through that all revealed to us the deep secret for forming community (locally or globally) – taking away the hatred that divides us, absorbing and holding it within ourselves and thereby transforming it."

This was the gift and the challenge that Jesus left his church.

Rolheiser uses as an analogy for this profound process-- a simple item that is often in our kitchen – a water purifier. A water purifier, if it is doing its job, removes

impurities and toxins and returns pure water. I'll never look at my Brita pitcher in quite the same way.

Like a water purifier, we are empowered to overcome division as we learn to practice reconciliation. As we learn not to return anger with anger, bitterness with bitterness, rancor with rancor.

These are complicated and sometimes bewildering times. Sometimes we feel paralyzed by our divisions, and disagreements. Jesus, through his life, death and resurrection, empowers us to be reconcilers as he was a reconciler. To take on in our own small way, this important work. To receive enmity and to give back graciousness and openness. And in that there is a ray of hope.

Here's a prayer we often pray in Morning Prayer to accompany us through the remainder of Lent:

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross, that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your name.

Amen