

“God’s Strength and Wisdom” – I Corinthians 1: 18-25

Most preachers I know preach from what is called Common Lectionary, a three-year cycle through the Bible and Liturgical Church year. Some weeks preaching the lectionary is easy. Other weeks it can be challenging. This is one of those weeks, because it is not easy to reconcile today’s scripture with what we want and tend to believe is so.

This week’s challenge comes because, like many of you:

I was raised on absolutes and categories, on rules and certainties. I was told my destiny was in my hands. If I worked hard, I would succeed. If I lived a good life, I would be rewarded. If I prayed hard enough, worked long enough, lived a regulated life, God would help me and guide me and work life in my favor.

(Joan Chittister, Scared by Struggle, Transformed by Hope, pg. 8)

You know, the old protestant work ethic we grew up with, and heavily influenced our approach to life. Certainly living and serving in this community, and having the privilege of working with and among you hardworking, affluent and generous people, helps make the argument that this thinking is still true, until. Until the economy falls apart. Until a 40-year-old mother of three has cancer. Until we discover a friend has been abused by a spouse, or significant other. Until a child is bullied and speaks of suicide, or has problems with substance abuse or mental illness. Until there is another school shooting or lockdown. Until movements like Black Lives Matter, Me Too and others cause us to confront the injustice in our society, and how some do not have same opportunities to succeed that we have. Until, until, until...

The absolutes fade, the rules change, (and) our image of God becomes bigger than the little, tribal, national, male idol who cares only for (people like me, or whom I approve becomes challenged). ibid.

Then, *what do we do? What do we say to our kids and grandkids? How do we piece it back together and help them piece it back together? How do we hold onto hope and generosity of spirit and action, when suddenly we don’t feel as loved and protected by God?*

In truth, it is easy to be kind, generous, loving and accepting when life seems, fair and just, as we define it, but when the harsh realities or apparent injustices emerge. Or, as in my case, when the reality that we live by grace and not works turns your world upside down. *What do you do? Where do you turn?*

I grew up a blue-collar kid in family of 7, two parents, five children. We were not poor, but there was no excess. My dad worked as a lineman for the phone company, and he always worked overtime to meet. My mom was a stay at home mom, until we were older, my oldest brother in college, my youngest sister in Middle School, and then she worked part-time in the school cafeteria while we were in school. While in High School and College I worked part-time to help pay my way. I am not complaining, just simply telling my story.

I also grew up in loving, caring, fairly progressive church. I was very active in the church, as was my family. I grew up believing, as many did, in the old Protestant work ethic, which includes the belief that we earn our salvation, much like we earn people’s approval.

Then I entered Seminary, and encountered the notion of grace, that we are saved, not by our works or actions, but by God’s grace. It was mind blowing, and raised a lot of questions, including, *Why be ethical or good? What is the benefit or reward? What is in it for me?*

Since then, I have learned, and have no doubt why I seek to be ethical and generous of spirit and action. It is not to be rewarded, or praised, or recognized or affirmed. It is in response to and out of gratitude for God's gift of grace, which many today, as in Paul's day, see as foolishness and weakness.

I confess grace may not make sense by the world's definition of fairness, but I know, deep in my heart, grace is not about worldly definitions. It is hard to explain this to people, just as it is difficult to explain why we live by faith, a trust in God's redeeming love. But, I can tell you I experience grace every time I am forgiven and loved, an every time I forgive another. I experience grace at the Men's Breakfast, or on the Men's Retreat when we talk about how faith intersects with our lives. I experience grace whenever I invite God to be a part of an important decision, trusting that whatever the outcome, God's grace is sufficient to see me through. I experience grace at Habitat, on a Midnight Run, and in every other loving, faithful response that affirms for me, *God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

Most of all, I experience it whenever I come to our Lord's Table, and when Matt and I have the privilege of serving you as you take and eat, take and drink. In these moments, I realize that, while many I love and care about don't get it, I do. I truly am grateful and thankful for a God who does not conform to this world, but rather offers to all the gift of grace, even though some may call it foolish and sign of weakness.

God knows it is not, my friends. God knows it is the true source of healing and hope; and blessed are we, when regardless of what others think, do or say, we know and live by the strength and wisdom God offers, not some, but to all, in grace.