

God's Protest Movement

Sunday, February 2, 2020

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

We are living in a golden age of protest. Case in point: 10 to 15 million protesters took to American streets from January 2017 through March 2018. That's a higher percentage of the population than the number of people who protested the war in Vietnam. In 2017 and early 2018, protests occurred in all 50 states, including many places where marches and rallies are rarely seen. Will these protests have an impact? Time will tell.

What we *do* know is that protest movements can change history. Consider how Martin Luther's 95 Theses instigated both the Reformation and our modern democratic world. Colonial protests of the Stamp Act (1765) led to the creation of the United States. Rosa Parks' refusal to move to the back of a segregated bus in Alabama (1955) ignited the civil rights movement. Even the Beatles had a social impact. In 1964, the rock stars refused to play for segregated audiences in Jacksonville, Florida. "We never play to segregated audiences and we aren't going to start now," said John Lennon. The struggle for racial equality in America inspired Paul McCartney to write the song, "Blackbird." Marches, rallies, vigils, protests. They can certainly have an impact, and even change the world.

The cross: a symbol of protest. In similar manner, the cross of Christ is a protest against those who demand signs and wisdom. The apostle Paul says to the Corinthians that "*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*" (v. 18). Protesting signs and wisdom is part of what it means to live a cross-shaped life.

But why is Paul so upset about signs and wisdom? He is speaking to the people of the powerful Greek city of Corinth, to men and women who know a lot about "*the wisdom of the world*" (v. 20). Paul is aware that in this educated and sophisticated society, "*Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom*" (v. 22). Signs and wisdom are part of their religious culture, and at first glance they don't seem to be such bad things. After all, God showed many great signs over the years (i.e., the star of Bethlehem), and wisdom is a quality that is praised throughout the Bible. Signs and wisdom don't seem to be deserving of marches, rallies, vigils and protests.

But here's the thing: Paul discovered that "*the world did not know God through wisdom*" (v. 21). It would be nice if the Greeks came to know God through wisdom, and it would be great if the Jews entered a relationship with God through powerful signs from above, but they didn't. Signs and wisdom are not enough, says Paul. Paul realizes that something else is needed: The cross of Jesus Christ. He believes that the surprising and shameful death of Jesus on the cross is what enables people to finally know God. Why? Because that "*surprising and shameful*" death on the cross is a message of love and forgiveness writ large. This, after all, is the meaning of the cross.

The folly of signs and wisdom. That's a bit of a shock, isn't it? It's like Martin Luther nailing his 95 Theses to the door of the church or Rosa Parks refusing to move to the back of the bus. Paul's words alter the *status quo* and break us out of our old ways of thinking. Paul is hitting the streets and proclaiming, "*Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles*" (v. 23). The cross is God's protest movement and it changes the world forever.

We need to be part of this movement today, because many of us still demand signs and wisdom. Many Christians ask God to give them a sign that tells them what kind of work they should do or what kind of personal relationship they should pursue. Some will even pray for something as simple as a parking space, and then, when one appears, they'll say, "It's a sign!"

In ancient Israel, the high priests wore a vest that had two stones on it called the Urim and Thummim. Whenever a question about God's will was brought to the priest, he would ask God to give the answer. If the stone on the left glowed, it indicated divine approval. If the stone on the right glowed instead, it indicated God's disapproval. It would be nice to have such a foolproof system, but God is not a cosmic GPS, working to move us quickly and painlessly from Point A to Point B. "God is more interested in developing a loving relationship with us," says author Vanesa Pizzuto. Discovering God's plans for our lives "is a natural result of a vibrant relationship with him, not its substitute. Otherwise, Christianity becomes a superstitious and shallow practice."

In place of signs, God gives us the message of the cross. Loud and clear, the cross tells us that Jesus loves us so much that he will sacrifice himself to bring us forgiveness and new life. It sends the message that "*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life*" (John 3:16). God gives us the cross so that we may have a relationship based on a loving sacrifice from below, not

a powerful sign from above. The cross is a mighty act of protest turning the world upside down.

A cross-shaped life. When we live a cross-shaped life, loving as Jesus did, reaching out with compassion to the poor, tending to the sick and the strangers in our midst, sacrificing as Jesus did, giving of our time, talents and treasures to support God's mission in the world, we join this protest movement. We serve others as Jesus did, remembering that *"the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many"* (Matthew 20:28).

A cross-shaped life is a protest movement against a world in which people usually act with self-interest. A decision to put the needs of others first is as radical as The Beatles' decision to say no to the money offered by segregated venues, and to bring their music only to places where blacks and whites could be together.

The message about the cross is a kind of foolishness to those who are perishing, says the apostle Paul. *"But to us who are being saved it is the power of God"* (v. 18). In the upside-down world of God's protest movement, *"God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength"* (v. 25). Christians who have faith in a crucified and risen Lord know that there is nothing wiser than the teachings of Jesus, and nothing stronger than the Lord who sacrificed himself for us.

If we find these words surprising today, imagine how shocking they were to the Greeks of Corinth. These men and women valued the wisdom of the great philosophers. They spent their lives searching for wisdom and seeking divine signs, and then Paul came along and said, *"We proclaim Christ crucified"* (v. 23). This was foolishness to them. It lay completely outside their understanding and their expectations.

Paul challenged them to look at the world through the lens of God's protest movement. *"God decided,"* said Paul, *"through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe"* (v. 21). Suddenly, a person didn't have to be wise to be saved. He didn't have to be a scribe. She didn't have to be a great debater. He didn't have to live a spotless life. She didn't have to be a learned theologian. All a person had to do was *believe*.

Of course, there is more to be as a follower of Christ than just *belief*, but, for Paul at this point in his conversation with the church at Corinth, that's another sermon. These are new Christians, not too far along in the faith, as Paul explains just a little further in his letter: *"I*

could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh" (3:1-3).

Sola fidei. Faith alone. That's brilliant, isn't it? In the upside-down world of the cross, Jesus is *"the power of God and the wisdom of God"* (v. 24). We don't need to understand Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. All we need to do is to believe in Christ and follow him in faith.

The Corinthians received this message as good news, and so should we. Like them, not many of us are born into privilege or wise or powerful by human standards. But this does not mean that we cannot enjoy the rich, full life that God desires for us. In the Lord's protest movement, *"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"* (vv. 27-29).

Yes, we live in a golden age of protest, but no modern rally can achieve what God accomplished through the cross. God is *"the source of your life in Christ Jesus,"* says Paul, *"who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption"* (v. 30). Wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, redemption. All these benefits are connected to Jesus and are the results of God's mighty protest movement. They are at the center of a cross-shaped life, qualities that can change the world for the better.

Prayer: O Holy God of Promise, we so often place our trust in the things we can see, and touch, and easily believe. But you did not ask us to believe what is easy, you have asked us to believe what is true! Forgive us, Holy One, when we doubt the ways you work. Forgive us when we find it hard to believe an ancient story. Forgive us we question how you chose to enter the world, born as one of us. Forgive our lack of faith and belief in ways which seem so impossible to believe. Help us to look in faith, open our belief, and set aside our doubts that you sent your Son, born of a virgin – the one who has come to set us all free. We offer these prayers in the name of your Son, Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.

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