

The Beds on the Plaza
Tuesday in Holy Week
Tuesday, April 11, 2017
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
The Rev. Patrick C. Ward
1 Corinthians 1: 18-25

“Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”

In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

AMEN.

Welcome to Holy Week. Whether you have lived faithfully into your intended disciplines and observances, or fallen out of routine by St. Patrick’s Day, here we find ourselves, together. That green hill far away for much of the year is now suddenly rising ground beneath our feet, and we are approaching the foot of the cross.

And we are starting this week with these two unforgettable reflections on the cross. This image Jesus gives us through John: of being lifted from the earth, of drawing all people to himself, into a kind of equal-opportunity embrace. And then these words from Paul, perhaps the best explanation of the cross’s power I know. Always a lesson appointed in these beginning days of Holy Week.

This has been a hard Lent for our parish – recent weeks have brought the death of several very faithful parishioners, distinct personalities and strong contributors, over many years, to our common life. One of these was a man, John, sick with HIV/AIDS since the late 1980's and known to me personally since the mid-1990's. As I sat with his brother and sister at his bedside two weeks ago at Beth Israel, I couldn't help but remember where I was living just after college, for a couple of years in the late 1980's. I was living in San Francisco's Castro neighborhood, surrounded by men slightly older than me, John's age, many of whom were visibly ill, coughing, many with lesions on their faces or arms. Many of them bundled up in heavy coats against the mild Bay Area weather.

My daily commute took me through the civic center, where one day I saw what looked like hospital beds with IV drip stands next to them on the plaza next to a side entrance to San Francisco City Hall. When I got closer not only did I realize that they were in fact hospital beds, but that men were lying in them. Dying men, attended to by family and friends. They had opted to die publicly, in the open air, in the sun or under the moon,

in the winds and fog and rain, as a kind of protest against what they understood as government and wider indifference to the lives of people with HIV. At the time I did not know quite what to make of these dying men. I think they frightened me very much. I think I kept moving.

But the image seared into my brain and I see them still. And these many years later I have to say their strategy worked, or contributed to a larger working. Eventually people began to care. Although many, many people still die each year from HIV across the globe, the world has changed in ways those men in their beds perhaps could not imagine.

In those years I had rejected the Christianity of my childhood, and I did not really have a coherent way to think deeply about what I was seeing. Perhaps the image of the beds on the plaza stayed with me because it was like the first stories I remember. It's like a fairy tale or a Greek myth, isn't it? The stories we heard first as young children, which tend to have plots that go something like this: someone small and weak and rejected, completely alone

in a dark and frightening world, somehow contends against tremendous odds, fire-breathing dragons or evil stepsisters, and in a mystical moment of transformation emerges as someone strong and beautiful, with blessings to share with all. These are powerful stories, not because of the magic necessarily, but *because we know them to be true, even when we hear them at the age of four or five*. True in the way we will later learn in school that the power of the infinitely gentle Mahatma Ghandi was true. True in the way that the power of a single dissident student, standing down four Chinese government tanks in Tiananmen Square, was true. Or true in the way that the power of a young woman in Tehran, using her smart phone to record and transmit the violence of state police against her fellow protesters, is true. There seems to be something foolish and reckless about each one of these. And it is this very foolishness that the Apostle Paul, writing to the Church in Corinth, holds up for us this week as he writes to them about the power of the cross. “The message about the cross is foolishness to many, but for some of us it is the power of God.”

Paul opens this first letter to the Corinthians by talking all about the cross.

By proclaiming, in his own words, Christ crucified. The cross of Christ, writes Paul, reveals how the world really works. The cross of Christ, writes Paul, explodes our normal, worldly understanding of power and fulfillment, wisdom and foolishness. ***For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*** The crux of Paul's argument though, the heart of his understanding of the cross' power, comes here: "God," writes Paul, "chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong."

They were lying in the beds, in the sun and the wind and the fog and the rain. What could they be thinking! They will surely catch their death!

What is the proclamation of Christ crucified but a call to lose one's hard protective shell, and discover a new way of living? Or even dying. A way of living that may mean the death of much of what you have previously thought wise and strong? To lose one's fear of a threatening world, and step out in faith, good faith? This is the way Jesus sent out the very first Saints, the Apostles, into a big and hostile and frightening world. ***"Go!"*** he tells them in

Luke's gospel. "*I am sending you out like lambs among wolves.* It's to be a campaign completely free of coercion. It's as reckless and trusting and as outrageous as dying men in hospital beds without a roof over their heads. But it's a way of living that transforms both the self and those around the self. In many respects, Paul lived the second half of own life in this very way. He was born both a Jew and a privileged citizen of the Roman Empire. He begins his public life, in fact, as a powerful persecutor of Christians. We know that he was supremely well educated because of his writing style and his rhetorical skill and his knowledge of scripture. But after his conversion, Paul will come to rely continuously on others for shelter and support. And he will question his own authority... continuously. "I have been sent by Christ to proclaim the gospel," he writes to the Corinthians, "but not with eloquent wisdom, which would empty the cross of Christ of its power." In other words, Paul is saying, *I am not the show.* I am not here to glorify myself. Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.

But how do we follow, today, in our daily lives and work, Paul's injunction to proclaim Christ crucified? Theologian Miroslav Wolf is a native of

Croatia who has visited us a few times in recent years. He was a firsthand witness to the war in the former Yugoslavia. To a struggle for dominance between Christians and Muslims. To the wisdom of the world being played out to tragic consequences. His classic work is a book called *Exclusion and Embrace* and it's informed by the tragedy of that war. But like Paul's letter to the Corinthians, it's really offers an extended meditation on the Cross. And when Wolf surveys the cross he sees in it, in Jesus' open arms, in Jesus' words of forgiveness, a gesture of embrace. As with these men dying in beds on the plaza. It's a supreme strength expressed at a moment of supreme vulnerability. For Wolf, it echoes the gesture of the God figure Jesus himself describes in Luke 15: the father of the Prodigal. A weak old man who has been wronged by his son, but who, in one of the most thrilling moments in scripture, opens his arms instead of barring the door. God's wisdom besting the wisdom of this world. The tough shell of fear and defensiveness dissolving. Eternal embrace. Have you ever extended such an embrace? Been received into one?

But Wolf goes on, and draws one conclusion that saves proclamation of Christ crucified from being a sort of self-sacrificing death wish. “Jesus’ mission,” writes Wolf, “certainly did not consist merely in passively receiving violence...if Jesus has done nothing but suffer violence, we would have forgotten him as we have forgotten so many other innocent victim. To be significant,” continues Wolf, “to be significant, non-violence must be part of a larger strategy of combating the system of terror.”

I think this is a saving insight. It is an insight that protects us from the impulse to embrace glorify all suffering as redemptive. And it’s an insight that calls us to action. Christ’s non-violent campaign was a campaign nonetheless. It is still a call to us to conform our hearts and our minds and our politics into sites of opposition to deception and oppression and exploitation. “It is this opposition,” concludes Wolf, that brought Christ to the cross. It is this opposition that “gave meaning to his nonviolence, that transforms non-violence from a quicksand into a foundation of a new world.”

A foundation of a new world. A foundation of a new world. Did dying men in the hospital beds on the plaza, exposed to the sun and the moon and the wind and the fog and the rain, understand themselves as laying a foundation? As builders?

The foundation of a new world. This noon, in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul is after nothing less than this. That is why when Paul surveys the wondrous cross, when he hears, in his innermost ear, the pounding of iron nails into yielding flesh, he doesn't hear any of it as an ending. It's instead the sound of a new life – for a new world under construction.