

Beyond Expectations
I Corinthians 1:25-27
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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We don't often think about this, but Christianity is weird.

Am I allowed to say that? A pastor? In a church? Can I name that out loud? Can you hear that?

We might have a really interesting conversation if I stopped right here and invited you to tell me the ways you think this faith we claim is strange. I wonder if you would name the same things that I would name?

But as I say this today I am really less concerned with what I would say or what you would say, and I am making that declaration as a reflection of what Paul said in his letter to the church at Corinth.

We heard just a few verses read today. And these belong in the context of a longer passage, but even they give us a taste of this "turn-everyone's-expectations-on-their-head" God we worship in this "upside-down" faith we have claimed.

Because did you hear the text? It talks about God's foolishness. It names God's weakness.

Paul even goes on, saying to his beloved community at Corinth, that they - the people in that church - weren't wise or powerful or noble. I don't know about you, but I know many people who would take offense if someone said that to them.

It is a weird faith that we claim.

And then if we broaden our view, if we read the longer passage around these few verses, if we go back to verse 18 and start there, then we hear, "For 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" (I Corinthians 1:18, NRSV).

And we forget this sometimes. We are so distant from Jesus' experience of the cross that we don't often think of it as anything other than a symbol of Christianity. The architecture of our church has crosses built in...inside and outside. We wear crosses around our necks. We tattoo crosses on our bodies. Because to us they are a symbol of our faith, a picture that tells someone something about us, a visual that reminds us who we claim to be.

So we forget that the cross was a torture device, a tool for capital punishment. In Jesus' day, the cross was not admired, it was not a thing of glory. It was a way that the powers-that-be kept control of the masses. It was a threat that loomed large in the background of people's decisions. It was an object of fear, not of devotion.

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And yet, the early Christians chose to claim it for something else. They chose to rebrand it for love.

“For 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,” (I Corinthians 1:18, NRSV) wrote Paul.

The central story of Christianity is a story rooted in foolishness. Because only fools admire someone who goes to the cross. Only fools make a hero of someone condemned by the authorities. Only fools name as Savior someone who is publicly dying at the hands of the state.

So, maybe it's okay to be a fool.

Because the claim of our faith isn't just about an amazing person who was killed, but that story comes to a climax not in death but in resurrection. Our faith doesn't look to the power of the cross' original purpose, but to the power of life that comes even when death is intended.

See, that's the fullness of this foolish faith - a claim that death does not have the last word, but that life is always growing in its place.

This is why we can wear the cross and see the cross in this very room, because our faith makes claims that are beyond the normal expectations.

While the powers-that-be used, and use, the cross for death, we, as followers of Jesus, claim the cross for life.

While the powers-that-be used, and use, their power to control the masses as they use threats to keep people in line, we, as followers of Jesus, claim the importance of freedom and imagination.

While the powers-that-be used, and use, their influence to draw lines that keep people out, we, as followers of Jesus, draw lines that widen the circle to bring people in.

As Paul says, to some it is foolishness, to others wisdom, but the reality is that God moves in ways beyond expectations.

God moves in ways beyond the expectations of those who want to use power and influence, wealth and prestige, to get their own way and keep control.

God even moves in ways beyond our expectations. After all, God is a god of surprises. And when we are listening, then we will hear something new.

Because sometimes we, too, get lulled by the ways of the world.

Sometimes we feel powerless next to those in power.

Sometimes, no matter how many letters we write to elected officials or how many times we donate to helping agencies, no matter how often we choose peace instead of violence, love instead of fear, sometimes it feels like it doesn't make any difference.

And sometimes we get lulled into thinking that the rich will just get richer and those in power more powerful, that the border walls will just keep getting higher and the rights of people will just keep being taken away. It's hard not to get overwhelmed or feel resigned to those realities that we see and feel too often.

But Paul reminds us that God is working in unusual ways, that God's ways might look like foolishness in our world, but they are still God's ways.

And the early church reminds us of this as they welcome slave and free, woman and man, Jew and Greek together as equals in the Christian community. The early church reminds us of this as women lead and slaves become friends. The early church reminds us of this as people take care of each other and some even give up their lives for their neighbors.

So, what is the foolishness that we claim?

Women can lead. Children matter. LGBTQIA+ people are equal and valued just as they are. Immigrants belong. Housing and healthcare are human rights. All of creation matters - all humans, all animals, all of the world.

See, sometimes it is hard to keep up the energy to fight the good fight. Sometimes it is hard to not give in to the ways of patriarchy and nationalism. Sometimes it is challenging to keep claiming that God's love is abundant, that God's intention for inclusion and God's love is for all. Sometimes it feels foolish.

But God's foolishness...it is wiser than human wisdom. God's weakness...it is stronger than human strength. God's love...it is so abundant that there is no one who is left outside of it. God's life...it is offered even when human powers would rather deal in death.

Friends, ours is God who works beyond earthly expectations and invites us to live beyond those expectations, too.

Ours is a God who invites us to be fools for love and for life, for inclusion and for compassion.

Ours is a God who raises up life where death wants to take up residence.

Ours is a God who loves beyond our wildest imaginations.

Maybe we are fools, but God is working right here in our midst. Amen.