

Sermon January 29, 2023
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Psalm 15, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

The Source of Our Life

Both of our Scripture lessons this morning center around living together rightly in covenant communities.

Our first comes from Psalm 15. The book of Psalms is a collection of hymns, songs, and poems whose content spans across genres: praise, lament, victory, loss. Our Psalm this morning is what we call a Community Hymn, and it specifically functions as an Entrance Liturgy.

This Psalm serves to teach the worshipping community how to gather together before God.

You'll hear three parts to this short psalm: the opening question, the response, and the promise.

The question that opens the Psalm is this: "Who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?" The answer? The blameless, the upright, those who do not slander with their tongue, who do what is right in the eyes of God and neighbor; and, interestingly, those whose financial practices are ethical and don't cause undue harm to the poor and dispossessed. The promise? That those who do those things shall never be moved - that is, moved from God's presence on God's holy hill.

Listen now for God's word to us in Psalm 15.

O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?
Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart;
Who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;
In whose eyes the wicked are despised, but who honor those who fear the Lord; who stand by their oath even to their hurt;
Who do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent.
Those who do these things shall never be moved.

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Our second Scripture lesson this morning comes from one of Paul's letters to the church in Corinth. As Richard mentioned last week, Paul can be challenging for modern readers, not least because he is usually writing to churches in conflict, who are experiencing disorder. He is also writing in a very specific location and time, and references a very specific set of circumstances for his own context.

The Corinthian church was no exception to this rule. In fact, it may be the standard-bearer. Corinth was a bustling seaport, and as such was an intersection of culture, class, and beliefs. The newly-formed church in Corinth, therefore, was one of the most diverse of any across the Mediterranean. Some were Jews, some were Greeks, and some were Gentiles of another background. Some were very rich, while others were the poorest of the poor. Men and women led together, though not all agreed on that, either. These many lifestyles and experiences intersected in the church, which sometimes led to disagreements, and other times led to all-out clashes, with various members posturing for power, trampling over one another for a better seat at the table.

We pick up here, in the first chapter of what we know as First Corinthians, as Paul is setting the stage for the rest of his letter: you are stronger together, so you need to figure all of the rest of your stuff out, because you're not best representing the resurrected Christ when you're arguing all the time, and proclaiming the resurrected Christ is pretty much the whole purpose of your existence.

Another thing that can be difficult about reading Paul as modern readers is what can appear to our ears as casual anti-Semitism. But this is where it's important to remember that not everything from the first and second centuries translates into our own culture and time. Paul himself was Jewish, remember, and an early persecutor of Christians before his own dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus. As my seminary professors liked to hammer home, the primary conflict and moral issue of the New Testament was not money, or lifestyle, or any of the things we argue over today. The primary conflict and moral issue of the New Testament was the question of how Jewish you had to be in order to be a Christian. That is,

did you have to follow the Torah? Observe the Sabbath? Keep the commandments? Could Gentiles - that is, non-Jews - even become Christians? Could you be a Christian as a Jewish-born person *without* remaining Jewish?

So when Paul speaks here about what the Jews believed versus the Greeks, he's speaking into a discussion that just does not translate into modern syntax, so we're not going to spend much time on it beyond this introduction. Because the point goes beyond the weeds of who believed what and when. The point Paul makes here, which he goes on to make through the rest of his letter, and that does translate to modern times is this: that God turns the wisdom of the world on its head. Jews, Greeks, Gentiles - it doesn't matter. God takes what appears foolish to the world, no matter the worldview, and uses it to God's own glory.

Indeed, Paul goes on remind the church in Corinth that they are stronger together because it is only by the power of God in Jesus Christ that they are together, at all. Paul implores them to remember that it is in Christ, and *only* in Christ, that they can find wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, lest they be fooled into thinking they have any other reason to boast.

Listen now for God's word to us this day from the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 1, verses 18-31, and pay special attention to what Paul says is God's wisdom versus the world's folly.

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. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But 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 the things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a 20th-century German theologian and pastor. Born in the early 1900s in what is now Poland, Bonhoeffer was a prolific writer and preacher, who was also famously an anti-Nazi activist and one of the founding members of what became known as The Confessing Church. The Confessing Church was a protest movement formed in response to the government's takeover of the German church, which not only dictated what Scripture could be read, but also, often provided sermons for ministers to preach that aligned with the ideology and theology of the Third Reich. Bonhoeffer, alongside his fellow Lutherans and joined by others from all backgrounds, bravely and publicly rejected the hate-filled, anti-Semitic, white-supremacist rhetoric and denounced its place in the church.

In part because of his leadership in the Confessing Church, and in part because of his participation in a failed assassination attempt on Adolph Hitler's life, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned in a concentration camp and later executed, just before the end of the second world war.

During his life, Bonhoeffer also taught at secret, underground seminaries across Germany, which existed to continue the theological education of those seeking resistance to fascism in society and in the church. These students, for obvious reasons, did not gather together in large classrooms for lectures, aided by their friends and colleagues in ministry as they wrestled with theology and doctrine and scripture, as those of us ordained today had the privilege to do. Instead, their education was a lonely and isolated existence. A student could be sitting next to a fellow seminarian on a train and not know it. It was during his time teaching at these underground seminaries that Bonhoeffer wrote one of his most famous

works, *Life Together*, a quote from which appears on the front of the bulletin.

He writes, “It is easily forgotten that the community of Christians is a gift of grace from the kingdom of God, a gift that can be taken from us any day - that the time still separating us from the most profound loneliness may be brief indeed. Therefore, let those who until now have had the privilege of living a Christian life with other Christians praise God’s grace from the bottom of their hearts. Let them thank God on their knees and realize: it is grace, nothing but grace, that we are still permitted to live in the community of Christians today.”

While the circumstances were different in the first century CE, the message is the same. Paul himself might have written to the Corinthian church, “It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are still permitted to live in the community of Christians today.”

Indeed, the themes of Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together* appear in our epistle this morning. Paul makes clear to the Corinthians that they are called to be saints *together*. Again, while everything from the first century doesn’t translate to modern times, we, too, live in a time of great discord and confusion, unsure whom we can trust, where factions form in church and in culture and we are almost forced to take sides. No longer is there much room for nuance in sociopolitical discourse. If you believe *this*, then you cannot possibly believe *that*. And if you don’t believe *that*, then you’re not welcome here. Just like in our current life together as in the first century, loyalties to various teachers and leaders and preachers and ideologies have formed. As Nancy Lammers Gross writes, “Paul unmistakably links loyalty to various teachers and preachers to foolishness. Misplaced loyalty leads to death. Paul unmistakably links pride in one’s own innate attributes to foolishness. Self-pride leads to death. Paul links earthly power and human wisdom to weakness and foolishness. These lead to death. These all lead to death not as punishment but because they blind us to the wisdom and goodness of God, and to the power of the cross.”

Indeed, when Paul asks the questions, “where is the wise one? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?” We aren’t exactly supposed to raise our hands and say, “Here I am! It’s me!” No, Paul makes the point that when we boast in ourselves, we call attention to our own foolishness. It’s not about what we are able to do *alone*, but instead the power imbued

in us in Christian community, by the power of the Holy Spirit, for the sake of Christ alone.

One of the places this power of community plays out in churches, but especially at Westminster, is in our Westminster Youth Fellowship, led, for the last 25 years, by our friend and colleague, the Reverend Nancy Hodgkins. Nancy has not only built a faithful and sustainable program over the last two and a half decades, she has cultivated a community of youth, adult volunteers, parents, and all of you, who have watched her transition from a brand new pastor to the exceptional leader and mentor she is today. The youth of this church are nurtured and challenged to think about their faith, not to shy away from big questions, and to continue their spiritual journey in whatever lies beyond high school for each of them. And Nancy does not just walk alongside students from 7th grade - 12th, bidding them farewell forever after they graduate. She visits them in college, and they, in turn, come back to visit her when they're in town. She walks with them through moments throughout the rest of their lives, from the difficult - deaths of parents and loved ones - to the celebratory - officiating their weddings and baptizing their children.

After worship, you're very welcome to join us downstairs in the Fellowship Hall for a reception honoring Nancy's 25 years of ministry here, and you should know that a day like today - a shoutout in the sermon and a cake downstairs in her honor - is kind of a nightmare for Nancy. Because for her, it's not about the praise and the appreciation - though she's earned it. Nancy has dedicated herself to this faithful service to our youth and our mission partners because she loves it, and because she's called to it, and because, above all, she believes in Christ's witness and ministry to our community and the world through the people of Westminster Presbyterian Church. Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. So Nancy, in case no one has told you lately, we love you - and thank you.

Each year, the student leaders of the youth fellowship, aided by Nancy and the adult volunteers, choose a theme on which to focus and study, to really flesh out a concept or series of ideas. This year, they've chosen "Branching Out," and you'll hear more about it on Youth Sunday, May 7th. But broadly speaking, the theme centers around learning about who they are and who God is calling them to be in the world, especially considering those who fall outside of the culturally-dominant center. They have been focusing on discovering and trying new things, relationship building, and

discernment. In many ways, the youth fellowship are a model for all of us, always, but especially their theme this year.

Because, in some, increasingly alarming ways, we really are not so unlike the community of Christians to whom Bonhoeffer was writing, especially with the rise in what some theologians and sociologists call Christian Nationalism. And you might be thinking - well, we're not Christian Nationalists, so we're in the clear. But, as Christians, we still must reckon with its presence among us in our nation, and especially among those of our siblings in Christ who declare themselves followers of the same, Triune God and have entirely - sometimes terrifyingly- different ways of living out that call.

As Paul D. Miller writes in an article for *Christianity Today*, Christian nationalism "is the belief that the American nation is defined by Christianity, and that the government should take active steps to keep it that way." Now, to be fair, that doesn't sound so bad on the surface. But there are more than a few problems under the surface, the least of which is that, as Diana Butler Bass points out, while our nation has always been *shaped* by Christianity, especially by Protestantism, we are not - and have never been - nor are we intended to be - a fully Christian nation. Another problem is that many who ascribe to this ideal resort to violent measures to achieve this end. In the past few years, those who identify this way have burned books, committed hate crimes against Jews and Muslims...you get the idea. And please hear: you can be an enthusiastically patriotic Christian and not be a Christian nationalist. You can be very proud of our country and want our leaders to live into Christian ideals and not be a Christian nationalist.

So what *is* the difference between Christianity - a banner we proudly carry - and Christian nationalism? Paul Miller continues, "Christianity is a religion focused on the person of and work of Jesus Christ as defined by the Christian Bible and the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds...Christianity is political, in the sense that its adherents have always understood their faith to challenge, affect, and transcend their worldly loyalties - but there is no single view on what political implications flow from Christian faith... Christian nationalism, by contrast, is a political ideology focused on the national identity of the United States. It includes a specific understanding of American history and American government that are, obviously, extrabiblical - an understanding that is contested by many historians and

political scientists. Most importantly, Christian nationalism includes specific policy prescriptions that it claims are biblical but are, at best, extrapolations from biblical principles and, at worst, contradictory to them.”

So, what are we to do with that? How can we be discerning? Paul gives us the answer, as does Bonhoeffer. We analyze and scrutinize everything through the lens of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Word made flesh. We start with Christ. We end with Christ. We ask ourselves what is the most loving, the most gracious, the most just, the most Christlike? And we go from there, to how we live and where we shop and what we buy and how we vote. We don't rely on the wisdom of the world, but instead the wisdom of God, which, at times, stand in total opposition.

The Theological Declaration of Barmen appears in our Book of Confessions, and is the confession of The Confessing Church, of which Bonhoeffer was a leader. The Declaration of Barmen, primarily written by Karl Barth and Martin Niemöller, was submitted by the Confessing Church as the theological precedent for their dissent. It clearly states that there is no supreme leader besides Christ, no one who is worthy of adoration and praise, no one in whom sanctification and redemption can be found outside of Christ. In a time and place where there was supposed to be blind dedication to another supreme leader, this was seen by many as an act of folly, foolish and reckless and dangerous. Instead, we can see now, that it was an act of great courage, wise and profound. God takes the foolishness of the world and turns it into wisdom. What some will see as folly is actually the only faithful way forward. And it is Christ alone who possesses the power for that kind of transformation.

And so in just a moment, we will sing a hymn of adoration to Christ, joy of heaven to earth come down, whom alone we worship and adore, lost in wonder, love, and praise. And then we will profess our faith using words from The Theological Declaration of Barmen, rejecting all ideologies and leaders and powers and principalities who demand our devotion but who are completely and wholly unworthy of it. We will proclaim Christ crucified and resurrected, in whom the Church is bound together in perfect unity, savior of the world and perfecter of our faith. As the Psalmist declares, and Paul implores, and Bonhoeffer urges, living uprightly in covenant community, traveling together down the path of wisdom, is the truest form of devotion to the Triune God, who is our hope, our peace, and our life. It

is grace, nothing but grace, that we are still permitted to live in the community of Christians today.

Many people and pundits and ideologies will try to convince us that only they can save us, that they have the truth, that if we would only listen to them we might, finally, be free. But this is foolishness. We gather together, week after week, to remind ourselves that Christ is the only one who can save us, Christ is the only truth, Christ is the only one who can set us free. We gather together, week after week, to comfort and challenge, confess and lament, pray and praise, give and receive, that we might be transformed, again and again, by the power of Christ's presence among us, and that we might, in turn, work to transform the world for the sake of Christ, and God's kingdom that is to come. And may we continue to do so, for the life of the church. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.