

March 8, 2015

## “Risking Forgiveness: Strength and Weakness”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



*1 Corinthians 1:18-25*

*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 foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both 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.*

Did you hear the news this past week that scientists working in Ethiopia have found the earliest known fossil on the ancestral line that leads to humans? They uncovered part of a lower jaw with several teeth, and have determined it to be about 2.8 million years old, roughly 400,000 years older than the previous record for a human-related fossil.

Wow! You know, it was a busy week. I suppose I feel a little bit older than I did last Sunday, but—400,000 years older?! That, as some would say, is awesome news. It means a lot of things. But one thing it means is that for some 2.8 million years, humans, in some form, have been on this planet muddling our way through in search of life, a better life. With some measure of strength and weakness, wisdom and folly, brilliant achievements and false starts, acts of compassion and heartless blindness, for some 2.8 million years we've been working out what it means to be human, how to live in these bodies, what it means to live in community with one another, how to get along, and how to help one another thrive. And of that time, for some two thousand years, give or take, we've sought to do so in the manner of Jesus Christ, through the lens of the cross, the place of forgiveness that magnifies our weakness and points us towards the life-bringing power of God.

The cross—foolishness to those who are lost, Paul observes. But, Paul insists, God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

There is a paradox in the cross that confounds our normal ways of thinking, does it not? It is that paradox we examined last Sunday as we confronted the depth of forgiveness found there. And it is the paradox of life from death, of strength in the guise of weakness, of wisdom far deeper than the foolishness we often profess.

The cross is our banner as we go again to Haiti. If you step back a few paces, a seemingly “wise” person, a cynic actually, would have to ask: why would ten seemingly normal, sane people carve a couple weeks out of their very busy lives to go back to that place? Haiti. Still one of the poorest nations on earth. Plagued by governmental corruption and volatility, a mostly non-existent infrastructure, sitting right on top of known earthquake fault lines. There's plenty of evidence showing how much of the redevelopment effort since the earthquake five years ago has been diverted or squandered.

And yet, we go back, with the cross, the symbol of death and life, as our banner. Why go? On this one, the church gets it right. The projects we work on are rebuilding projects—churches, houses, schools. That's what's needed most. And, even more critically, we don't just swoop in to do whatever we think is most needed. We work with Haitians themselves, with the church in Haiti, the folks who are there day in and day out. They help us know what is needed and where our assistance can make a lasting difference. We work as partners in Christ with the Methodist Church of Haiti on projects addressing shelter and reconstruction, education, health and hygiene, livelihoods and capacity building.

I'm so proud of our team. In the first years of our response, we partnered with other congregations to put a team together. This year, for the first time, we're sending our own team. 10 amazing folks—Michael, Todd, Sherry, Jan, Roger, Norma, Kim, Tricia, John, and Karen. Some are returning, some going for the first time. They'll be working on the last phases of completion of the Leveque Methodist Church and staying on site. They're excited that the church sits right in front of a large Methodist school, so they'll have lots of opportunity to play and interact with the kids.

I guarantee you that they've all heard enough stories to know what they're getting into—the very hard work, the challenging conditions, and all the emotions from A to Z that go with a mission experience—including, no doubt, the need to forgive themselves and one another from time to time in the midst of the disorientation, stress, and fatigue they will encounter.

They've done the shots, gathered their gear, and raised a lot of money. And as the insert in today's Order of Worship details, there are still ways each of us can contribute—with money and with prayer. Our Preschool is gathering school supplies for the team to take along. I've brought a few pennies myself this morning to add to my contribution for the team.

And that's the thing. There's something wonderfully crazy about this effort, the foolishness of God which is actually wisdom and power, a story we're sharing with others. Our Team planned a great fund-raising dinner a week ago, inviting their friends, neighbors and colleagues. I can't tell you how many of them said, as they met me, "Oh, wow—are you from the church? Are you from *that* church?"

I was so proud that night, not only of our Team, but of us all. Who we are. How we live out our faith. How what we believe shines through our priorities and our commitments: "God is real. God is love. Every person matters. You matter. Together we can change the world."

We humans are still working out how to live together on this planet. The things that might seem like foolishness to the world sometimes—things like forgiveness and service and compassion and selflessness and even love—these things, in the wisdom of God, are the basic building blocks of life together. No less so now than 2.8 million years ago, though I wonder how adept those earliest homo sapiens were in the nuances of human interaction. Who knows? What I do know for sure is that God calls us to step up and give it our best. As the writer, James Baldwin wrote: "not everything that can be faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

We are a congregation, as exemplified by our Haiti Team, that is brave and faithful enough to face into the challenges of this life. Loving enough to insist that our brothers and sisters in Haiti must never be forgotten or set aside. Compassionate enough to give sacrificially of time and money and heart. And under the banner of the cross of Christ, to insist on the power of life over death in any form, knowing that in the weakness and the foolishness of God is found wisdom and power beyond anything our eyes can see.

Thanks be to God.

Notes:

Christopher Joyce: "Jaw Fossil In Ethiopia Likely Oldest Ever Found In Human Line." NPR Morning Edition, March 5, 2015.

James Baldwin, "As Much Truth as One Can Bear," [NYT Book Review](#), Jan. 14, 1962.

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