

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
9/16/2012, Holy Cross Sunday
1 Corinthians 1:18-24, John 3:13-17
Surpassing Reason, Yet Sensing Our Faith to be True

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let me begin this morning's sermon by reading aloud for you the first verse of the hymn we just now sang. The hymn is called "Precious Lord, Take My Hand."

Precious Lord, take my hand,
lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
Through the storm, through the night,
lead me on to the light.
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.
Precious Lord, Take My Hand (WOV 731)

A few weeks from now, on Sunday, October 7, my wife, Carol, is set to visit us and to talk about her recent climb up Mt. Kilimanjaro, in Tanzania. I think that a fun part of our Coffee Hour presentation will be a homemade movie she made of her climb. She had a little video camera attached to her headband, so you can see what she sees. You see her walking poles stretching out ahead of her, and you hear her merrily chatting away as she climbs. She chats with fellow hikers, with the guides, with the porters. She tries out her Swahili. For me, the remarkable thing about the movie is simply how happy she is as she climbs. It is not always easy going, but she loved every minute of her climb of that great mountain.

But there is a significant gap in the movie. The culmination of the adventure is called "summit day." That's the long, final hike up to the very highest point of the mountain. It is the most exhausting part of the climb because it means a long, cold climb into a world that is becoming more and more frigid and deprived of oxygen.

But there is a natural reason why that final part of the climb is missing from Carol's movie. It was just too dark. The final ascent began at midnight. They reached the summit at 8 a.m., when the morning sun had warmed the temperature to minus 20 degrees, and so Carol is able to film that final sunrise part of the ascent. But the many hours of darkness were lost to the camera.

Now, those wee morning hours were the ones that especially interested me. I wondered whether she had any doubts as she was hiking along. Did she have any second thoughts, any regrets that she had undertaken this madness? It turns out that, no, Carol loved every minute of that midnight climb too. In fact, she sometimes had tears in her eyes -- tears of gratitude to God for this experience.

She said that if you looked up the mountain, you could see little points of light, zigzagging their way toward the summit. They were the lights attached to the

headbands of other hiking groups. The little lights illuminated the next step. That's all. They were focused on the next step.

That's all Carol needed. So long as she could see the next step, she was fine. In fact, she spent many of those wee morning hours in prayer as she hiked upwards, step by step.

Looking back at it, she felt that that midnight climb had a kind of holiness about it. She said that walking by faith is often like that. The good Lord gives us only enough light for the next step. Then, our job is to take that next step and entrust the overall adventure to the Lord.

Precious Lord, take my hand,
lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
Through the storm, *through the night*,
lead me on to the light.
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

GETHSEMANE

Judging by our Lord's midnight prayer in Gethsemane, that's what it was like for Jesus himself. What he could see and feel was his fear, his terror at the crucifixion that lay before him. His heart seems to have been transfixed by the horror of crucifixion, so that when he prayed, his prayer could only amount to a plea that he could be spared that cup of suffering. Nonetheless, he was able to see enough light - maybe one step ahead - that he could entrust the matter to his heavenly Father. It was as if he gave his hand to his heavenly Father and walked out into the night, to meet his betrayer and the host of guards who would whisk him away to the Cross. "Not my will, but thine be done."

Today's famous Gospel text speaks of the death of Jesus with a kind of calmness and elegance:

¹⁶For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16, KJV)

But I do believe that behind this majestic verse, there was a world of suffering for both Jesus and for his Father in heaven. And there was a world of faith for Jesus in walking ahead toward his death. It is not always easy to follow the way of the cross. Sometimes, we have light for only one step ahead of us.

FOLLY

In this morning's Epistle Lesson, St. Paul acknowledges that the way of the cross often looks unreasonable to the world:

¹⁸For the word of the cross is *folly* to those who are perishing... (1 Corinthians 1:18, RSV)

Indeed, the way of the Cross can look unreasonable to both the intellectual Greek and to the pious Jew:

²⁰Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1 Corinthians 1:20, RSV)

With these words, St. Paul gazes upon all humanity, casting a glance at both Jews and Gentiles. Thereby he alerts us that in the eyes of some of the very best people in the world, Christians might well look like fools.

What I find interesting is that for the Christian himself, for the Christian herself, the way of the Cross might also seem hard to fathom. It is not simply the Greek philosopher and the Jewish scribe who find Christian faith hard to follow. We ourselves might have to forge ahead one step at a time, as if that is about the limit of what we can see and must leave the remainder to our God.

I have two things to say, then, about the sometimes unreasonable nature of our faith. First is this: Let it be! Let us be fools for Christ. If the eloquent Greek philosopher and the learned Jewish scribe conclude that we are mad for following Jesus, let us madly follow onwards, undeterred! After all, our heart is onto something. We have a sense of something good, we have a vision of a good world, of a way of life that is good and true and love for a human being. And let us not surrender that divine instinct just because we cannot answer ever objection the philosopher or the scribe might mount against us

And second, let us not be dismayed by the puzzlement of the world toward us, nor even by the world's contempt, for in the end, the world's confusion concerning the gospel comes from a happy cause: The love of God toward humanity, including the Greek philosopher and the Jewish scribe, is so immense that human reason can hardly take it in. So, for a while, the holy gospel concerning a crucified God will tend to surpass human understanding. Yet, in the end, the human heart will find itself drawn and encouraged by this gospel. And it is humbling to realize that you and I, by our manner of life, can help a puzzled world along toward faith. Then they too will join us in being glad to be fools for Christ.

Indeed, let us sympathy and mercy on a skeptical world, both on the philosopher and on the scribe. After all, they are like children -- like innocent children on Christmas morning, who crawl out of bed, wander into the living room, and stand there stunned by the beauty of things. "Can this be true? Can this

be real? Can things be this nice?” They can scarce take it in! It is a tremendous thought, straining the capacities of our mind, that the Maker of heaven and earth should become a slave and a crucified Man on the cross, all for love of us!

THE SURPASSING NATURE OF GOD’S LOVE

St. Paul sometimes refers to this capacity of the Gospel to surpass our understanding – not just the understand of the philosopher or of the scribe, but also of the Christian. Here is an example: In Ephesians 3, St. Paul prays that we might obtain some grasp of the immensity of God’s love for us:

¹⁷and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ which *surpasses knowledge*, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God. (Ephesians 3:17-19, RSV)

So, St. Paul is right in this morning’s text that the Greek philosopher and the learned Jewish scribe might call the Gospel of a Crucified God “folly.” But let us have some sympathy for them, for they stand there at a kind of precipice. They stand awe-struck and hardly able to yield themselves over to a tremendous idea -- the idea that the Maker of heaven and earth loves us overwhelmingly, that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but having everlasting life:

But what sayest thou, O man? Christ became a slave for thee, “having taken the form of a slave,” (Phil. ii. 7.) and was crucified, and rose again. And when thou oughtest for this reason to adore Him risen and admire His loving kindness; because what neither father, nor friend, nor son, did for thee, all this the Lord wrought for thee, the enemy and offender-- when, I say, thou oughtest to admire Him for these things, callest thou that foolishness, which is full of so great wisdom? (Chrysostom on 1 Corinthians 1)

The way of the Cross is an immense idea to try to take in. Who could have invented such a notion, that the Maker of all things would choose to become one of his creatures forever afterwards, and to die a most cruel death for them that they might live and not perish?

And so I have sympathy for those who hesitate to believe such a thing. Though St. Paul seems impatient with the Greeks for their rejection of the Gospel, I have sympathy for them and believe that they are always on the verge of believing in Christ. They are continually at the tipping point. And for all you and I know,

through our own faithful walk with Christ, we might win the philosopher over to our Lord.

SYMPATHY FOR THE PHILOSOPHER

I have special sympathy for the philosopher, perhaps because, back in the day, I was a philosophy major myself. That town St. Paul is addressing – Corinth – was inheritor of one of the most beautiful flourishings of human reason and art that our world has ever known. The Golden Age of Greece, around 500-300 BC, had been centered in Athens, but our town, Corinth, had received and cherished the glorious achievements of Athens. The epic poetry of Homer, the tragedies of Aeschylus, the sculptures of Phidias, the philosophy of Plato, the mathematics of Pythagoras, the science of Archimedes – all of this beauty and achievement permeated the minds and spirits and the rightful sense of pride of the Corinthians, along with their own success as a commercial port at a crossroads of civilization. And into this ancient, proud, sophisticated civilization came these strange Christians speaking of a crucified God.

St. Paul is doubtless correct that to many of the Greeks, the message of the Cross was foolishness. And yet, with my mind's eye, I see dear, old, Socrates meeting our Jesus. I see Socrates on the edge of some crowd, listening to Jesus, weighing his words, pondering his manner of life. In his own day, centuries before the birth of Jesus, it had been as if Socrates had already caught something of the Spirit of Jesus.

In the great final prison scene before his death, Socrates awakens to find his own friend Crito sitting by his bed. Crito is amazed at how peacefully Socrates sleeps when death is so close at hand, when the hemlock potion is even now being prepared. Crito has come with a plan to bribe the guards to let Socrates out of prison and to escape. Socrates is grateful for the loyalty of his old friend, but he declines to escape. He asks Crito a question – it concerns a conviction that Socrates has always had and always taught. It is the conviction that one ought not to return evil for evil:

Tell me, then, whether you agree with and assent to my first principle, that neither injury nor retaliation nor warding off evil *by evil* is ever right. And shall that be the premise of our argument? Or do you decline and dissent from this? For so I have ever thought, and continue to think.

And because Socrates continues to believe this, he declines to escape from prison. He declines to escape from death, even though, in his own eyes, his conviction and his execution are unjust. He will not harm the laws of the land, for much good depends on those laws. He has lived according to the laws, he has believed in them, and he will not do them harm now, though they would kill him.

The final words of Socrates to his old friend Crito go like this. Socrates has gently led him through the dialogue. He finishes by asking Crito whether he has anything more to say.

CRITO: I have nothing to say, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Leave me then, Crito, to fulfil the will of God, and to follow whither he leads.

It is an early anticipation of the final words of Jesus in Gethsemane:

...not my will, but thine, be done. (Luke 22:42, KJV)

The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that the Holy Spirit was alive and well in the days of Socrates. Indeed, the Holy Spirit has been inspiring both the Father, the Son, and the prophets from the beginning. In this final dialogue with Crito, it seems that Socrates has been inspired by this Christ-like Spirit and is yearning for the kind of righteousness we find in our Lord Jesus.

I picture Socrates, then, gazing on at Jesus, listening to the words of our Lord and pondering his manner of life. And in my imagining, I love to hear Socrates say, "I have found my man. I mean to be Christ's man henceforth."

PERISHING

St. Paul spoke of "perishing." He said that the gospel of a crucified God is foolishness to those who are perishing:

¹⁸For the word of the cross is folly to those who are *perishing*... (1 Corinthians 1:18, RSV)

But the thing is, our God wants *none* to perish!

¹⁶For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him *should not perish*, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16, KJV)

This God most definitely does not want the philosopher or the scribe to perish. And so, they are always on the verge of conversion. The Maker of heaven and earth has made the mighty mind of Socrates too. In the end, the gospel of our crucified God cannot be alien to such great minds. They are always on the point of tipping over into faith, always on the point of almost being persuaded, and wonder of wonders, you and I might be the difference. The thing that would have won Socrates was not just the words of Jesus, but also the life and death of Jesus. What conquered the world was not theology or philosophy, but simple piety lived by folks like you and you.

Let us live according to the way of the cross, accepting blows for the sake of continuing in love. Let us continue with this way of the cross with hope and confidence and joy that outpaces any rational reckoning, and in the process we might just call the philosopher and the scribe to the one we adore, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.