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Micah 6: 1 – 8
1 Corinthians 1: 18 – 31

Psalm 15
Matthew 5: 1 – 12

“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing...Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”

These words of Paul touch on what’s at the heart of all of our lessons today – that the ways of God, the way of following Jesus, are absolutely counter-cultural to the ways of this world. The Beatitudes, the words from the Psalmist and the prophet, Micah, and Paul are upside down with the values of the world we live in – and the values in which we so often participate. But I’m willing to go out on a limb and say that the ways of God are actually the part that’s right side up and it’s the ways of this world that are upside down. And that when we follow the way of Jesus, we are – however gradually – subverting the ways and values of this world.

Author Frederick Buechner writes, “The wisdom of [humanity] is the kind of worldly wisdom that more or less all [people] have been living by since the cave man. It is best exemplified in such homely utterances as *You’ve got your own life to lead, Business is Business, Charity begins at home, Don’t get involved, God helps those who help themselves, Safety first*, and so forth.” We might add to Buechner’s list *Looking out for Number One, Being first is always best*, and many more. These are the maxims, or mantras, that we have drilled into us from the time we are little by parents, teachers, coaches, Madison Avenue and so many other sources. They are, all too often, the creed by which we live in America.

Buechner goes on to say that “although this wisdom can lead on occasion to ruthlessness and indifference, it is by no means incompatible with Niceness...a [person] can be basically interested in nothing so much as feathering his [or her] own nest and still give generously to the Cancer fund, be on the Board of Directors, run for town office, and have a soft spot in his [or her] heart for children and animals.” But, Buechner says, it’s over and against this way of thinking that Paul’s words about the ‘foolishness of God’ *look* so foolish to our world. There used to be a popular bumper sticker, and even signs along the highway, that read “Drive carefully – the life you save may be your own.” *That*, Buechner says, is the “wisdom of [humankind] in a nutshell.” Compare that to the message of the Gospel which says that the life you save is the life you lose. In other words, the life around which you or I clench our fists, the life which we hoard or guard or play safe with is in the end, as Buechner notes, a life little worth living. It is only a life in which we give ourselves away in love that is a life worth living. We see that exemplified in Jesus, a man who turns the other cheek to the point of dying on a cross, a man without a penny to his name, a man not all that popular except among his friends (and many of them run away when the going gets tough!), a man who has no wealth, no power, no status which the world recognizes. He is like a court jester, a perfect fool.

“Rise and plead your case,” cries Micah on behalf of the Lord, “for the Lord has a controversy with his people...” The Lord then reminds the people of God how God has rescued and redeemed them, only to have them fall into their same old habits of faithlessness. Then, in a rhetorical question, the Lord says, what do I ask in return? The wrong answers are how the world tends to respond, with copious quantities of ‘things’ to appease God, basically buying God off. That isn’t the way God works. God simply wants the people of God – us – to do justice, love kindness and walk in humility

with God. But justice, kindness and humility are not always valued in our world. If they were, we wouldn't have the issues of war, poverty, hunger and oppression (among others) to deal with.

The psalmist echoes Micah's words, asking who can say that they are righteous and abide with God? Those who don't slander. Those who do no evil to their friends. Those who don't hold grudges against their neighbors. Those who stand by their word. Those who don't lend money for interest. Those who don't take bribes. It's a long, but not all-inclusive list of behaviors with which the psalmist is obviously familiar from life experience. Behaviors which all too often thrive and flourish in this world.

Paul writes to the fractious congregation in Corinth. In the course of the whole letter, Paul addresses a number of ethical and behavioral issues which divide the people. Things like when they gather for the Eucharist, which is more like a full meal, those who are wealthy bring a lot but they only share it with their friends and not with those who cannot afford to contribute as much. Things like inappropriate intimate relations among members. Things like lording it over each other about who has the most important spiritual gifts. All these things – hoarding and looking out for number one, not respecting the dignity of every human being, arguing with one another to claim who is the greatest – all of these, Paul says, are about the things that the world's wisdom says are important: wealth, status, power. But they are foolishness in the eyes of God, Paul says. None of that matters to God. In not so many words (or knowing Paul, more words!), Paul spells out the same thing as Micah – it's justice, kindness and humility (or meekness) that are important. Those are what represent Godly wisdom.

And then there is Jesus and the Beatitudes. Don't be full of yourself, but empty yourself *of* yourself so that God can fill you, Jesus says. Be disturbed by, grieve the things that should have been done and have not been, and the things that shouldn't have been done but have been. Don't think of yourself being smarter, faster, better, richer than others – be meek, be humble. Take note of the voices which are not being heard in the world – those who are trampled upon and held back, those who are kept subservient and weak, those who are imprisoned physically, spiritually or emotionally – and work to help lift them up. Let go of the wrongs done to you because at some point, you've probably done the exact same thing to someone else. Don't think the worst of people, try to see them through God's eyes and you will see God in them. Quit warring with one another – it isn't a pie, there's enough for everyone to have a slice, really, everyone. Bear up under criticism, ridicule, mockery and worse; you know the Truth (with a capital "T").

Honesty and justice, humility and sharing, forgiveness and liberation, repentance and pacifism, respect and honor those are not usually what make the headlines every day. They seem not to be the way to "get ahead" in today's world. The Rev. William Willimon, writing in *Christian Century* magazine 35 years ago, said, "Blessed are the meek? Try being meek tomorrow at work and see how far you get. Meekness is fine for church, but in the real world, the meek get to go home early with a pink slip and a pat on the back." "Blessed are the peacemakers," he continues, "for they shall get done to them what they are loath to do to others. Blessed are the merciful for they shall get it done to them a second time. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for they shall be called fanatics." Sadly, Willimon seems to be right about the world. "When we hear the Gospel not with Sunday-morning ears but with Monday-morning ears," he adds, "it can sound foolish indeed, tragically foolish or comically foolish, depending upon one's point of view." Imagine kindness on Wall Street, humility in Hollywood or justice in politics. [D. Clendinen, *Journeying with Jesus*, 2014]

Micah, the psalmist, Paul and Jesus all describe a counter-cultural way of being, counter-cultural even 2600 years ago. To live by the wisdom of God and forsake the foolishness of the world is to indeed live differently, to be crazy by the world's standards, to 'live off the grid' at least metaphorically. It is to forego self-interest and self-preservation. These writers, these lessons, help us refocus our definitions of wise and foolish, help us re-establish our values, and help us renew our commitment to Christ. It may be simple, but it isn't easy.

Thurgood Marshall, as a young NAACP lawyer in the 30's and 40's, often told a story in his speeches around the country. It was about two sisters who lived together all their lives. Sometime in their 50's, they had a falling out and quit talking to one another. They divided the house in half with tape and paint. One night, years later, one of them got up in the middle of the night and fell, breaking her hip. She cried out in pain and her sister came running. As they waited for the ambulance, they held each other and they kept saying, I'm sorry, I forgive you, I love you to one another. Marshall always ended his story by saying that "the law can break down walls that divide people, but it cannot build bridges to connect them. That's a matter of the spirit."

We are called to build bridges, not walls. Bridges made out of love and sacrifice, justice and kindness, mercy and humility. And we are called to be fools: fools by the world's standards, fools for Christ. I'll end with the Godly wisdom attributed to Mother Theresa which many of you – maybe all of you - have heard before, but it bears repeating:

People are often unreasonable and self-centered; forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of ulterior motives; be kind anyway.

If you are honest, people may cheat you; be honest anyway.

If you find happiness, people may be jealous; be happy anyway.

The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow; do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have and it may never be enough; give your best anyway.

For you see in the end, it is between you and God. It was *never* between you and them anyway.

Amen.

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