

"Cross Over – Transformation of Ideas"

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First Presbyterian Church
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OLD TESTAMENT LESSON - Psalm 15 NEW TESTAMENT LESSON - 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Steve Arterburn, in his book “More Jesus, Less Religion,” says when villagers in Papua New Guinea first heard Genesis translated into their native language, “the attitude toward women in the tribe changed overnight. They had not realized or understood that *the woman* had been specially formed out of the side of the man.

Without even hearing this concept developed, the villagers immediately grasped the idea of equality between the sexes and began adjusting their behavior, (treating each other as equals). The thought that women are by nature subservient to men; we in this day and age have come to realize it’s a pretty foolish idea. But there was a time when this foolishness was reality. Women *were* once subservient to men, because somewhere in history we said so, and we believed it.

And unlike the villagers in Papua New Guinea who heard the truth and acted on it, some of us *still* treat women as subservient. Compared to some remote village, the early Christians in Corinth – and certainly we in Independence – live in a very complicated society. Corinth was the hub of a major trade route, the intellectual and cultural heartland of Greece, a city known for its wealth. It was a dynamic, commercial city open to new ideas, but prone to shameless promiscuity. Simple truths, such as gender equality, can easily be lost amid relative wealth and material success – both in Corinth and Independence.

NBC News reported Thursday that the U.S. Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission found the recent economic meltdown was, quote, “avoidable – the result of human actions, inactions, and misjudgments. Warnings were ignored. The commission says the greatest tragedy would be to accept the refrain that no one could have seen this coming and thus nothing could have been done.” “If we accept this notion, it will happen again.” Wrong ideas leading to bad consequences. It took a 10-member panel of the nation’s finest financial experts reviewing millions of pages of documents, interviewing more than 700 witnesses and conducting 19 days of public hearings in New York, D.C., and across the country to determine the simple truth. We did it to ourselves. It’s not that complicated. And if we search our hearts, we’ll find that God has given us the ability to know the truth when we hear it, even if it means the acceptance of new and challenging ideas.

When Paul marched into the city of Corinth some 2000 years ago, he brought with him a new idea, a savior crucified. “Jews demand signs,” says Paul, “and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”

Now this passage isn't to be used today against Jewish faithfuls or even decent, honest people outside the faith. We can all be found demanding signs and succumbing to intellectual trickery when the truth doesn't go our way. The struggle for Christians is to honor the truth simply because it's the right thing to do.

The Corinthians struggled with this amid their wealth and power. And we struggle with it for much the same reason. But the villagers of Papua New Guinea? Amid their material poverty, they had no such struggle accepting the truth. And we, too, have access to the simple truths in life, *if* we get in touch with our *spiritual* poverty.

In the past two weeks, we've seen how being a follower of Christ turns us outward toward others, bringing us joy even in the midst of our own troubles. We've seen how God uses all creation to shape the world in God's image, calling us to partner with both religious and secular institutions for peace and social justice. Today, we look at how places us in the shadow of the cross of Jesus Christ, so that we might be in touch with our spiritual poverty, and thus be open to new ideas that bring us closer to God and to one another.

Standing before God at the cross, we are all equals, and the truth of God's love for us and for all creation is undeniable. In the presence of *this* truth, evils such as financial or gender dominance can not stand. And yet, we still succumb to such foolishness, every day.

Take for instance, another famous financial scandal. Bernie Madoff relied on the complexities of Wall Street to scam investors out of \$65 billion. Madoff knew what he was doing was wrong. And nine years before his arrest, there was a financial analyst named Harry Markopoulos who knew what Madoff was doing was wrong – and mathematically impossible. But the Securities and Exchange Commission ignored his suspicions until nine years later in December 2008, when Madoff's sons finally did what they knew was right. Against their own best interests they told authorities their father was running a scam.

Why is it so hard for us to face the truth, to do what's right in God's eyes. We know in our hearts what to do, but we've come to believe and to trust something different. Like the Corinthians, we've come to see wealth and status as the measure of success. And we've lost our ability to trust the most simple and natural answers in life.

The following quiz consists of four questions designed to show how qualified you are to be a professional. Ninety percent of professional got all the answers wrong, while many preschoolers answered correctly. No. 1, how do you put a giraffe into a refrigerator? The correct answer is: Open the refrigerator, put in the giraffe, and close the door. This question tests whether you tend to do simple things in an overly complicated way. No. 2, how do you put an elephant into a refrigerator? Did you think to your self, "Open the refrigerator, put in the elephant and close the door?" Wrong. The Correct Answer is: Open the refrigerator, take out the giraffe, put in the elephant, and close the door. This tests you ability to think through the ramifications of your previous actions.

Well, the quiz goes on from there, but you get the point. Often the simplest and even most foolish answer is the right answer.

As Christians, are we willing to trust the simplicity of our faith, even if to the world it seems foolish? In a few moments, we will ordain and install our new elders and deacons, and recognize our new trustees. As part of the ceremony, we will also reaffirm our baptismal covenant. (Don't worry; you get a shorter sermon today to make up the time).

Baptism is a Christian practice that gives form and substance to our adoption as children of God, our dying to sin and rising with Christ to new life. In baptism, we cross over from our old way of being and embrace a new idea – that we were called by God, even before we could formulate a response; that our calling as a Christian has more to do with who God is than with what we think about ourselves.

Living into this idea is a life-long process. And by doing so, we who have been baptized help to plant the idea of salvation and service with those who have not yet heard or believed that following Christ makes a difference. Through our baptism, through our faith as Christians, the idea of who we are as human beings is transformed from individualism to community, from getting needs met to meeting the needs of others, from mere existence to life eternal.

Elders, deacons and trustees – along with all our committee members and church volunteers – are men and women of all ages who are living into their baptism, their call to serve the Lord. Most of them know what that means: giving of their time and devoting their energies to things that are largely beyond their control.

The idea of giving yourself in service to the church is simple, but for many people it goes against what they've learned getting by in life – don't do something unless you know you can succeed, give what's fair and not a penny more. And yet most people who serve at church or volunteers elsewhere do so in spite of their limitations; they give knowing they won't be repaid; they serve knowing *they* won't really personally benefit. And they do this because that's how they were raised; they do so, because someone once introduced them to the idea of giving selflessly, with no guarantee of reward – an idea found at the center of the cross.

This is still a foreign concept for far too many people – both those inside and outside the church. Too often, the idea of selfless giving exists outside ourselves, with no meaning or substance in our day-to-day lives. We casually set aside the cross in order to take up whatever captures our attention; we buy into worldly wisdom that says a savior crucified? – how weak and foolish, falling for the sake of others!?! You won't catch me doing that (as if we can avoid taking a fall if we just try harder and work smarter than the next guy or gal).

But we can't. We all fall short. It is only by looking to the cross that we see “God (*has*) made foolish the wisdom of the world.” God has turned our idea of success inside out and upside down, by transforming Christ's suffering into our success, by overcoming *all* that might get between us and God, even death itself. God shined light on the foolishness

of *any* idea or pursuit that creates distance between us and God, anything that fails to bridge the gap between our lot in life and the lives of others.

In Jesus Christ, God has led the way so that we might cross over to a new, simpler way of thinking. “The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,” says Paul, “but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

We each champion different ideas and various causes, and in the end, the only question is, is our cause right or wrong, is this *our* idea or God’s? In answering that simple question, will you – will we – turn our energies toward self interest at the expense of serving others, or will we as Christians align with the foolishness of the cross, and thus, help others to see, experience and be transformed by the power of God?

Amen.