

When We Can't Do Enough
1 Corinthians 1: 18-31
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First Scripture Lesson

Micah 6:1-8

Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.

“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.”

“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

He has told you, O mortal, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Second Scripture Lesson

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

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.

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 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."

Please pray with me.

For God in these moments, we look to you for comfort and direction. We pray, Lord, through these words and this time, through the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, you would bring them to us for the days ahead. We pray through Christ our Lord, Amen.

I want you to know that I don't enter the pulpit lightly this morning. The issues of the past months and especially the news of this past week are hard on everybody. The news received has been especially hard to take for some; some will be happier than others on results and things, it just depends on one's perspective. How we move forward is going to be filled with all kinds of opinions in the days ahead. We recognize that.

Life can be hard even in the best of times but there's a particular weightiness involved when we're in times of trouble. A variety of emotions come forth during these times; some people feel loss and anger; some people are frustrated; some are just weary. For some there is, frankly, satisfaction. The variety of proposed solutions will also bring out a variety of thoughts from people. People approach change and people approach challenges in different ways. Some avoid, some forgive, some lean in and don't lean away. Change is hard even in the best of times.

We are a group of people who are used to accomplishing things; used to conquering things and solving things, figuring things out. We come to times like this and we just can't quite do that in the same way; it's just not the way it's been. Things that have happened in the months past will not be undone. But I want us to think about what it means for God to redeem the time. While things can't be undone, we can't go back and change what's happened in times past, the clear call of scripture, throughout the Old and New Testaments is that no matter what has been done, God can bring redemption in this and God can be glorified. I would like to talk about that this morning.

In Micah's prophecy, God is frustrated because the people don't understand. They're not remembering what God has done so they're not responding in a way that pleases God. So it gets a little ridiculous at times, some of the things they think of doing, but it's all too deep and it can get pretty adversarial between God and the people. So God asks them to go back and remember the things that have been forgotten, to remember the grace of God and most of all to remember the presence of God through the many chapters of Israel's life and the changes that have been made.

God speaks directly to the people. God recalls the saving history with them when God has repeatedly rescued and led Israel. The accusation is that, in spite of God's faithfulness through all this time, God can't understand the

people's faithlessness. They forgot. They don't remember. And God redeemed Israel so that his saving acts would continue to be known and remembered so that in other times of challenge the people could be encouraged by the work in the past.

In response to God's questions, Micah then gives his prophecy about what can be done. We can't undo what has been done. God seeks the doing of justice, faithful honoring of God-established relationships. God expects people to love kindness, devotion to loyalty and treating people respectfully, and living out the practice of steadfast love which is another Old Testament theme.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, a proper attention to God in that we walk humbly with our God. It all hinges on this. The great error of Israel in the Old Testament continually was trying to act out obedience according to the law but forgetting the covenant relationship for which the law was given. So we don't just do things because we're supposed to do them. God gives us boundaries; God gives us acts because it shows our recognition of the covenant relationship with God.

The bad news is that that didn't solve everything so we come to the reading about a church in Corinth and troubles remain. People are estranged from God and in Corinth they are also estranged from one another. They come together in this community out of significantly different cultures with different understandings on how to contend with sin and to navigate life. Paul summarizes it by saying, Greeks seek wisdom, Jews seek signs of power. That's how it's always been done by these cultures, but it's not enough. The Greeks created a culture of wisdom but it still wasn't enough to explain everything. The Jews pointed back to the saving acts of God, expecting more, but that still was not enough to conquer every foe that they ran into. Neither solved the challenges of their day or frankly, of any day. Human wisdom, power, those are not things that solve everything.

Yet we have a tendency to look back about how things have been solved in the past and think well, maybe if we do that again, it'll happen. Maybe if one more good idea will solve every problem that we have. Maybe one powerful act by somebody. Yet, it's not going to happen because we're flawed human beings. We are never going to be wise enough; we're never going to be strong enough. So even though we can do many good things through the guidance of God, we can do justice, we can love kindness, we can walk humbly but we can't solve all of our problems.

What Paul proclaims here in the beginning chapter of Corinthians is that God has proposed another solution and that solution, again, is relational. Paul talks about the cross of Christ. He is talking not only about what was done on the cross, he's talking about the savior who hung on the cross. And that Savior that reaches out to us personally, and corporately, to give us the wisdom we need and the strength that we lack on our own. The Bible never talks about undoing what has been done. It doesn't talk about how what was done in the past can be totally forgotten because that's how it happens. Those problems that we face, those results of sin won't completely go away.

One of my good friends, a Church of Scotland pastor, many years ago was talking about how, in regard to our forgiveness, that as human beings living on this earth, that God forgives us completely. God gives us a clean slate. Yet, because we are humans living in space and time, often times, the result of that sin in our lives leaves scars. Those scars don't always go away.

To look at it through biblical history, the people of Israel were enslaved in Egypt for a number of years and God redeemed them and that was wonderful. God brought them out of Egypt, out of bondage, out of the Promised Land. But those years of pain were remembered. They didn't go away. They weren't forgotten but they were redeemed. There is a story in the New Testament

about a woman who was ill for decades and as Jesus pushes his way through a crowd, she just gets close enough to reach out and touch the hem of his garment and she is healed. Jesus turns to her and blesses her for her faith in his healing. She goes on as a redeemed person. Yet those relationships that have been troubled for so many years because of her uncleanness do not immediately go away. She had to work through those into a new day.

Peter betrayed Jesus and Jesus sought him out on the coast of the Sea of Galilee and forgave him and led him into the future. Yet, Peter always remembered that. So the Bible does teach us of the power of God to forgive and to heal and to show mercy and to be redeemed. That is what we trust in – that what has been done is done and it can't be undone, in any aspect. Looking through our own lives, things cannot be undone but God can redeem anything that has been done. All things, Paul says, work to good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose. It doesn't undo the tremendous slavery in Egypt, or the pain of betrayal, or the sins that people have had for years. God can work that to good.

So, what does God's redemptive power look like? God's redemptive power demands that we tell the truth and accept that responsibility. Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." There is a freedom in naming openly, what is true. Paul reminds us that there is hard work to do throughout all of our lives. He says, with spirit and with trembling we're called to examine how we approach failure and sin and mercy and forgiveness. Paul says all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

We are also challenged then to look at one another, look upon one another through the grace of God. Peter said, how often shall I forgive someone? Seven times? Jesus said, No, seventy times seven. In other words, don't count Peter, you can't count that high. Continue to forgive just as God has forgiven you.

The summation of all this is to rely upon God completely. The whole point of this is to be strengthened in our relationship with God – to not forget what God has done in the past but to remember God’s saving grace with the trust that God redeems us and leads us into the future.

We are called to walk in those principles that we can understand and live them out to the best of our ability – to be just, to be kind, to be as merciful as possible and to walk humbly with God – each of us, humbly. And to rely upon the power of the cross to forgive sin, to redeem lives, and to move us into the future. We trust in this, in our personal redemption, whenever we say the Apostle’s Creed together. We trust in this in our relationships with others, both in the church and outside the church. We trust in this in that the hope of the world is Jesus Christ our Lord and our Savior. At the end of the day, whether we do well or not, Christ is our Savior. Whether we do poorly, Christ is our Savior. Whether we’re having a great time with one another or a tough time, Christ is still our Savior.

So, friends, in the sense of upheaval and concern that we have in the life of our church and in the other aspects of our lives as well, I want us to rely upon Christ for strength in this moment as in all moments. God will redeem this time as we trust in God to move us forward under the power and mercy of Christ’s cross.

Many of you are aware that I served three interim pastorates before I came here, in large churches which had a significant amount of conflict. I have seen in each of those cases, the power of God to redeem, the power of God to move into the future. It is not easy but it is possible as we trust in God to do so.

There was a British evangelist named Gypsy Smith many years ago. He was a revivalist pastor. He was asked “How do we get revival to come to our place, to our church, to our city?” Smith said, “Well, go into your room and kneel

down on the floor and take a piece of chalk and draw a circle around yourself and ask God to bring revival within the circle. And when God has done that, revival's on with community.

We need one another to give this to God. We need to pray, daily, moment by moment. We pray for our church, for our elders, for Christine, for David, for anybody who's hurt by this because God can redeem and God will redeem as we ask God to do so. There are many things that'll happen in the coming weeks, processes, protocols, training. Jim will lay some of that out to you later on. The most important thing we can do as we grow in grace and faith is to be aware of God's presence during difficult times.

In earlier sermons, during the beginning of this situation, I invited you to do two things. I invited you, like redwood trees, to intertwine your roots with one another to strengthen one another at this time. I invite you to do that again. I invited us to get back in the boat with Jesus and to be in his presence as he navigates us through this time. I invite you to do that again. We cannot do this on our own. In the words of the apostle Paul, who is no stranger to pain and conflict, he said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." And I would make that corporate. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. In all things, God works to good for all those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Friends, in the difficult days ahead, let that be true. Please pray with me. Lord God, we fool ourselves in times in our lives, thinking we can do things without you – that we are strong enough or wise enough or obedient enough. And we know Lord, that this is just not true. Thank you for opportunities to be obedient yet we know that we cannot do enough on our own. But we know that in you all things are possible, that you accompany all of us, each of us, every one, through this time. I pray that we would remember that and trust in you at this time. We pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.