

Pastor's Message - 2/2/2020
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
Matthew 5:1-12

This afternoon it will begin. Standing astride the fifty-yard line of Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Florida, a senior NFL referee will toss a coin. Moments later, he'll blow his whistle, and Super Bowl LIV, the 54th Super Bowl and the 50th modern-era National Football League championship game, will decide the champion for the NFL's 2019 and 100th season. The National Football Conference champion San Francisco 49ers will play against the American Football Conference champion Kansas City Chiefs.

For several bone-jarring hours, the 49ers and Chiefs will pound each other. When the dust finally settles one team will emerge the victor. The players of that team will embrace, pound one another on the back, and probably dump a barrel of Gatorade over their head coach. Sportscasters will cluster around their team captains and star players, hungry for a few pithy quotes about sportsmanship, and how it feels to be America's heroes. When everything's said and done, every player on the winning team will walk away with a fancy gold ring and a multi-thousand-dollar bonus check.

As for the opposing team, they'll be paid pretty well, too. But there will be no Super Bowl ring for them. No cheers and hugs. No victory party. Just a slow, dejected walk through the tunnel: to the place that will be known for the next year as the Losers' Locker Room. The thrill of victory, the agony of defeat. That's football. It's winner-take-all. What a contrast, how different this thinking is, from the wisdom of Jesus in the Beatitudes! What the Lord seems to be saying, here, is much closer to "loser take all."

A key theme in our Bible readings today is the contrast between what the world sees as strength and wisdom and what God regards as strength and wisdom - - as Paul distills it for the Corinthian Christians, "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." This difference is reflected in the reversals that Jesus lists in the Beatitudes, as he teaches that those who are persecuted, who suffer, and who are exploited by the world will be blest and receive a great reward.

Followers of Jesus, like Paul, see things differently. The "message of the cross is foolishness," Paul writes. At least that is how it looks to the world. It is the ultimate vulnerability, the ultimate weakness. It is a surrender of all power, all directive ability, submission to the powers that be. It would be foolish, the world would argue, to base a faith, to base a way of living in the world on such an act, on such a surrender.

We see it differently, of course. We see ultimate power here; the power of sacrifice, the power of vulnerability. What else would you call it? To win through

surrender. To conquer enemies by loving them. To transform our world through humility. To lead by serving all. Foolishness. And we're just the ones to do it! That's Paul's point: we are the ones chosen to live this foolish life in the world around us. We weren't chosen because of our smarts, or our strength, or our status in society.

Our two Scripture passages today from 1 Corinthians 1 and from Matthew 5 have a common thread of God's expectations for believers and for Churches. In the passage from Matthew, Jesus lays out some expectations about what it means to be His follower in the Sermon on the Mount.

What comes first is a declaration of blessing: In the midst of all of this, *you are blest*. God is with you. The kingdom has come near. This is the good news. This is what matters. This is the beginning.

Recognizing our blessings and giving thanks are part of a theme of God's kingdom that is central to Jesus' teachings, and that kingdom exists both in the midst of, and in contrast to, this world. So much of what follows the "Beatitudes" in Jesus' ethical teachings contained in the "Sermon on the Mount" reflect the dramatic contrast between how this world works and how kingdom-living works. The "Beatitudes" serve as an introduction to that contrast, for they turn the assumptions of the present world upside down.

The passage we call the "Beatitudes" consists of nine "God blesses" statements. Six of the nine (poor in spirit, humble, hunger and thirst for justice, merciful, pure in heart, and peacemakers) relate to what qualities should characterize kingdom people. The other three (mourn, persecuted, and mocked plus) relate to the experiences of kingdom people in this world.

"Blessed" — or, as some translations have it, "happy" — seems like nonsense in several contexts.

Happy are the poor in spirit? Happy are those who mourn? Happy are those who are persecuted? It seems strange that such nonsense should be widely displayed in church hallways, Fellowship Halls, and classrooms. But what seems like nonsense to the world is the experience and testimony of the kingdom.

Appointed 8 months here now, I continue to look forward to learning what drives the faith of the Waupun United Methodist Church. What ministries burn in the hearts of the people of this Church and what are the sacrifices that define this Church? What does this Church boast in? size? intimacy? friendliness? the music? The Salad Luncheon, the Rummage Sale, the Craft Fair? relevance? tradition? How does such boasting accurately identify this Church?

The world boasts about what it has and who it is and what it does. The world sees Jesus' teaching as so much nonsense and, instead, boasts about common sense. But that's not the wisdom that helps the church be the church.

Instead, Paul says, we are all to line up and bow before the true Wisdom, "the foolishness of the cross" which is nothing less than "the wisdom of God."

In God's wisdom, God chooses the foolish, the weak, the low, even what seems to have no value at all. And out of all of that and in the face of all its opposites, God creates salvation. There is to be no boasting of any kind except in God alone through the cross of Jesus Christ.

The wisdom of the cross is our wisdom. We have no other.

Will Rogers tells a true story of an incident that happened when he was a young cowboy in Claremore, Oklahoma.

One of his steers broke through a fence and began to eat his neighbor's corn. Because of this the neighboring farmer killed Will's steer. He should have told Will what he had done but he didn't. When Will found out what had happened, he was furious.

Will and his hired man mounted their horses and began to ride down the road to the neighbor's farm. As they rode, a blue norther struck and by the time they arrived they were covered with ice. The farmer's wife said her husband was not home, but invited the two of them into the house to wait by the fire. Will noticed how thin the wife was, and how scrawny the five children were.

The farmer finally returned, and shook hands with Will and his hired man, unaware of the reason for their visit. As the storm outside grew worse, the farmer invited the two visitors to stay for supper and overnight. The farmer then apologized for having nothing but beans for supper. He said that the storm had interrupted the butchering of his steer.

As they all ate together, Will Rogers laughed and joked with the family. He noticed how the eyes of the children lit up every time they mentioned the beef they were going to eat the next day.

As they rode back home the next morning, the hired man asked Will why he had not confronted the farmer about the steer he had slaughtered. After some moments of silence, Will replied, "I intended to, but then I got to thinking. You know I really didn't lose that steer. I just traded it for a little human happiness. There are millions of steers in the world, but human happiness is kinda scarce."

It is possible to choose the way of the servant, the way of sacrifice. That sacrificing for what is right, in the face of accepting what is wrong, is not powerlessness -- it's the ultimate power. That power is nonsense, it is foolishness, to the world, but it is salvation for the follower of Jesus and the Church which exists for the cross. In the cross and in sacrifice we see the kingdom has come near. This is the good news. This is what matters. This is the beginning and the end. Foolishness, nonsense, but abundant life here and in the coming Kingdom.

God's kingdom will not look like the kingdoms of this world. Matthew has already made it clear that in Jesus, this kingdom has come near. In this prologue to Jesus' magnificent sermon, the point is reinforced. Jesus is revealing the truth about the kingdom. He does so by recognizing that the crowds who have gathered around him -- the poor and afflicted, the despised and reviled -- are in fact the very

ones who are truly blessed. The happy ones are the 3.5 billion poor, not the 1%. The Beatitudes enable us to see that the reality we have taken for granted is not reality, at least as God sees it.

Jesus makes it clear that this reality is not "in some heaven light years away," as one contemporary hymn ("Gather Us In") puts it, but "here in this place," where new light is shining. The church lives in this joyful tension between the now and the not yet, confidently proclaiming the kingdom which will shatter the present imbalance. Those who see with the eyes of faith see a reality the world cannot understand. The downcast, the depressed, the ones not counted as having value by the world are indeed those whom God has already blessed.

Reflecting on the section of Paul's Letter today and reflecting on Jesus' beatitudes can lead us toward "counting our blessings." It's a common enough pastime to list life's rewards. Yet this sort of self-satisfied list-making fails to do justice to the rich concept of blessedness expressed in the Sermon on the Mount. What Jesus is talking about is not so much blessings as blessedness. That blessedness comes, by the grace of God, to those who seek to live in godly ways. It is not a victor's olive branch, bestowed at the end of a long and grueling race, or the Lombardi trophy to the winner of the Super Bowl, so much as it is a state of blessedness that descends on those who seek to do God's work in the here and now. We are blessed as we run this race, and not merely as we break the tape at the finish line. This defies ordinary logic. How can those who are "poor in spirit," who "mourn," who are "reviled and persecuted" be blessed? Jesus seems to be dealing in oxymorons.

Yet this is exactly what Jesus means. The Beatitudes shimmer with paradox and mystery.

Tens of thousands will gather at Hard Rock Stadium to cheer the game this evening. It is estimated that some 100 million people will tune in to watch, at least, some part of the Super Bowl. They will cheer good plays, field goals and, of course, touchdowns. They'll cheer, clap, whistle, stomp their feet, shout and make a lot of noise. They may even do "the wave."

As Christians, we don't make "the wave" when someone scores a touchdown, but when someone turns the other cheek. As Christians, we should offer a "high five" when someone sacrifices his or her own welfare for the sake of others. As Christians, we should be clapping and stomping in rhythm when someone offers a prayer for an enemy or a persecutor.

These are "foolish" cheers. But they are the genuine response of a community that recognizes God's greatest strength was revealed in a supreme act of weakness and sacrifice.

To a world that can only recognize brute strength as power, the church and her cheers will remain a foolish-sounding proposition - "but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18).