



First United Church of Oak Park

Thanks . . . I Guess

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

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It's often pretty difficult to piece together what was the original text and meaning of an ancient biblical manuscript. First off because they are very old, 1900-plus years old. They speak about how to live a life of faith in the world, but the world is very different. They are almost always translated, and have been repeatedly edited, with confusing or embarrassing passages tidied up. That's why there is a general rule of thumb in biblical scholarship, that if you have two versions of a given biblical passage, then the more confusing one is original, the more embarrassing one is original. Because, the reasoning goes, nobody edits a passage to add in embarrassing and confusing details.

By that standard, today's passage must be one of the most original biblical passages in the whole New Testament. Because it is by turns confusing and embarrassing. The Apostle Paul is writing to a church he founded in Corinth, decades before any of the Gospels were written down. This is within a handful of years of Christ's crucifixion on the cross, a handful of years after the beginning of the church. And things don't seem to be going that great.

The church is supposed to be continuing the ministry of Jesus, spreading the good news of the crucified savior across the whole world. But instead they're spinning their wheels. They are supposed to be standing in the breach of the dangers and toils and snares of life and presenting the good news of God. A world much in need of good news, a world where the poor were the vast majority but held none of the power. A world where women did much of the work and received little regard. A world where children were vulnerable, and national borders were just playthings in the hands of empire. And the church was supposed to be doing something about all that, being a forerunner of the Realm of God where peace and mercy would be the law of life.

The church has got a big job, and based on Paul's letter, things aren't going great. They're supposed to be unifying all, living out Jesus' prayer that they may all be one. They Corinthians can't even get along with each other, having broken into factions based on who had baptized whom. It was the old story of arguing over who was the greatest in a movement that was supposed to create unity. That's the situation inside the church. And Paul, who is supposed to have the answers here, Paul can't even remember who it is that he has baptized. I baptized Crispus and Gaius, he said, before remembering...well, I also baptized the house of Stephanas, and beyond that I can't remember. Again, this is all very original text because it's both confusing and embarrassing.

For a passage that is about who is supposed to be doing God's will in the world, ushering in the Realm of God, it doesn't inspire much confidence. God dreams of peace in the world—wouldn't it make more sense for God to use the Pax Romana, the peace that comes when all the power is held in one set of hands? God dreams of unity among the people—wouldn't it make more sense to inspire the Roman senators of the day to make that the law, instead of an upstart religion with little social capital?

The church does not have martial power, and the church cannot command obedience. Yet, Paul says, as messy and confused as the church is, don't lose heart. This is the way of the cross. A crucified savior, a healer who was slain, a leader who was abandoned, a teacher who was ignored, the risen Lord of life who passed through death. The cross, a total reversal of all that makes sense. God chooses the cross, not the sword. Weakness, not power. Foolishness, not wisdom. The way of the cross. It is by that power, the cross, that the world would be healed.

Paul writes to the Corinthians, since God chooses what is weak and foolish to do God's work, then God is calling you to do great things. To which they could reply...thanks? I guess?

It's often pretty difficult to piece together what was the original text and meaning of an ancient biblical manuscript. First off because they are very old, 1900-plus years old. They speak about how to live a life of faith in the world, but the world is very different. Yet, here we are, 1900-plus years after this letter from Paul to a church in Corinth, and the same basic problem exists. We are supposed to be continuing and carrying out the mission of Christ in the world? We are supposed to be standing in the breach of the dangers and toils and snares of life and presenting the good news of God? If anything, since the very first days of the Christian church, the world and its problems have gotten harder to fathom. The world is vastly larger, vastly more connected, vastly more complex, the problems more daunting, the stakes more cataclysmic. The poor are the vast majority but hold none of the power. Women do much of the work and receive little regard. Children are vulnerable, national borders and those who cross them just playthings, political poker chips, in the hands of the powerful. And the church is supposed to be doing something about all that? We, First United Church of Oak Park, we are supposed to be doing something about all that?

If I were God and I were drawing up a plan to address the world's problems, I very well might choose tools that look like billionaire investors, or the United States Army, or the manufacturing base of China, huge and mighty enterprises that wield power and money and influence unimagined in any era before ours. But then again, I am not God, and God is not drawing up any plans to address the world's problems. That plan has already been laid out. The cross. And the ones who will walk the way of the cross, it is the church. It is us. It's not just us, of course, but it is us.

And so what do we have at our disposal? We have parents with young kids who are also worried over ailing parents, trying to hold the generations together like a chain that needs every link to hold. We have children, gathering pocket money to put in the collection plates, making sandwiches that will be given to Venezuelan refugees whose

long journeys have landed them in Oak Park. We have the ill and infirm, we have the downtrodden and those who are heartsick with grief. We have the actually deceased, whom we call the saints, the example and memory of the faithful who have gone ahead of us to glory. We have what would not be accounted as very much. We have exactly what we need, as long as what we seek is the way of the cross. A crucified savior, a healer who was slain, a leader who was abandoned, a teacher who was ignored, the risen Lord of life who passed through death. The cross, a total reversal of all that makes sense. God chooses the cross, not the sword. Weakness, not power. Foolishness, not wisdom. The way of the cross. It is by that power, the cross, that the world would be healed.

Amen.