Third Sunday in Lent

Psalm 19 1 Cor. 1:18-25 John 2:13-22

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 3-7-21

One of the things Zen Buddhism is best known for is its use of "Koans", which are short statements, questions or stories posed by teachers to their students for the students' pondering and reflection. They are intended to be puzzle-like in nature, revealing for the students greater truths about the world and about themselves…

Some examples of Zen Koans, in the form of questions, are, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" or "What is your original face before you were born?" An example of a Koan in the form of a statement reads this way, "If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha."

As much as we might assume that Zen students are eventually supposed to come up with a "clear understanding" of what a Koan "means" or a "correct answer" to a Koan's question, one Zen practitioner suggests otherwise, saying, "*The Koan serves as a surgical tool used to cut into and then break through the mind of the student… Koans aren't just puzzles that your mind figures out suddenly and proclaims, "There's the answer!" Rather Koans wait for you to open enough to allow the space necessary for them to enter your depths – the inner region beyond knowing.*

Although Koans are most often associated with Zen Buddhism, Christianity is full of them, none of them more impenetrable or puzzling than those found in the first two chapters of Paul's first letter to the

Corinthians as he declares ***Christ crucified*** to be the source of all wisdom and strength for Christians… continuing on from the verses we heard read just a bit ago in this way… *"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…"*

If that's not a Koan, I don't know what is… A Koan very much in keeping perhaps with a word of "wisdom" from 17th century Christian mystic Angelus Silesius who wrote,

"God, whose love and joy

are present everywhere,

Can't come to visit you

unless you aren't there."

(The "you" that is, that is so full of itself it has no capacity for letting anything else in; not even God… not even love).

In some ways I think this is the "heart" of the Koan St. Paul hoped the Christians in Corinth would be open enough to receive into the depths of their being – in that inner region beyond all knowing… So bound were they to the measures of "strength" and "success" as the world defines those words, quarreling amongst themselves about who of them possessed the greatest spiritual gifts, who among them were the most skilled orators, who among them had been baptized by the most gifted and charismatic of teachers...

Paul's witness to the Gospel in his first letter to the Corinthians offering an entirely different way of seeing and being and evaluating "success", even to the point of saying that the definitive disclosure of what God is like is seen here… + in powerlessness and vulnerability… in a kingship so foolish in love it ended in mockery and derision and failure and death… in the ludicrous suggestion that somehow in this kind of foolishness and weakness was to be found a wisdom and a strength beyond measure…

You can imagine perhaps how such a proclamation might have been received by those in the Corinthian congregation, made up of both Jews and Gentiles who had indeed committed themselves to the Christian story as a result of an earlier visit from Paul, but whose lives were very much influenced by the sophistication of Greek culture, Greek oratory, Greek governance, Greek wisdom, all of it on fine display in the success-oriented, up-and-coming cosmopolitan city of Corinth…

None of the folks in the Corinthian congregation eager, I would think, to meditate on the Koans Paul was offering them… I mean really… who wants to hear about the cross when the "health and wealth gospel" will pack a stadium? Who wants to hear that the community of faith shaped by the Christian story will not be made up of the powerful, the wise and the aristocratic, but of the weak, the foolish, and the poor?

Who wants to hear that the definitive disclosure of what God is like is to be seen here… + in powerlessness and vulnerability… and that to hitch one's star to this God means one's life will be shaped by such foolishness, which, it turns out bears a kind of wisdom the world cannot

fathom or understand, because really, who can understand this + being a sign of anything that has anything to do with wisdom or strength?

No one I should think… No one can **under-stand** it… Which is why the Christian life is not about **understanding** the power of the cross, but about **standing under** it… about waiting for it to open us enough to allow the space necessary for it to enter our depths – the inner region beyond knowing… the cross being the Koan at the heart of the Christian story…

So, I will tell you that despite an entire life spent in the church; despite a fine seminary education; despite almost 35 years of committed Biblical study and theological reflection, I too admit defeat when it comes to **under-standing** the wisdom of the cross… But when I try again to seek *some measure* of understanding, there is one image above all others that comes to my mind…

An image from my 20 years as pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church, where for 18 years, on the first Sunday of every month at 1:00 in the afternoon, we hosted what we called our Sunshine Service… A service for those in the larger community whose lives were affected in some way by developmental disabilities or dementia or cognitive impairment…

Rain or shine, snow, sleet or hail, on the first Sunday of every month Sunshine guests would arrive with their caregivers in special vans and cars, and in through our doors they would come for a service unlike any traditional Lutheran worship service… A service in which we would sing songs like "Jesus Loves Me," "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," "This Little Light of Mine," "Take Me out to the Ballgame," and "You are my Sunshine," accompanied by Redeemer folks playing

guitars, banjos, saxophones and kazoos and by our Sunshine guests themselves playing a variety of rhythm instruments…

And bringing the same enthusiasm with which they played those rhythm instruments to the enactment of Bible stories in which anyone willing to do so played the parts of disciples, townspeople, animals, wind, rain, angels, rainbows, despised Samaritans, prodigal sons, love lost fathers, shepherds, wise men and bright Christmas stars…

Now mind you, this was on Sunday afternoon, after regular Sunday worship and faith formation in the morning, which of course were the **"real"** and the **"important"** Lutheran offerings for the day… Offerings I had gotten to church by 5:30 in the morning to prepare for so they would be perfect, beautiful, engaging, theologically astute… practicing my sermon aloud three times in the empty sanctuary so it would be smooth as silk, making sure the chairs were straight, the Bible was set, my sermon was perfect… oh, did I already mention my sermon?

So, on the first Sunday of every month we would host our Sunshine Service, which from the moment our first guests arrived would be anything but "perfect" as this Lutheran pastor would define the word, as chairs were moved helter-skelter to make room for wheelchairs, and some guests wandered about the sanctuary unable to settle down, and others rocked back and forth in their chairs, and others never stopped "talking," although not in a way anyone could understand what they were saying…

But in the midst of all that bedlam, if you had been there, here is what else you would have seen and heard…

You would have seen our Sunshine guests, arriving at Redeemer from an assortment of different group homes, greet one another with

exuberant affection and tender care, as if they hadn't seen one another for years…

You would have seen some come to worship all decked out in their Sunday best… Jerry in his three-piece suit, Roxy with fourteen strands of Walmart jewels around her neck…

You would have seen Eugene strapped into his wheelchair so he wouldn't fall out, grinning from ear to ear and nodding his head wildly back and forth as we sang "You are My Sunshine"… and crying while we sang "Amazing Grace."

You would have seen Chris with his white and red cane extended in front of him as he made his way to the front of the sanctuary, aided by his friend Scott, and there you would have seen Chris open his Braille songbook, following the Braille text with his fingertips, so he could sing "Amazing Grace" for the rest of us, with his back-up trio made up of Karen, Jenny and Geneva, none of whom were ever on the same words or the same notes at the same time.

You would have seen the Christmas pageant in which we had two Marys because two Sunshine guests wanted to play the part; one of those Marys, when it came time for her to give the Baby Jesus to the other Mary, refusing to do so because no way was she going to "let go of Jesus."

During prayer time you would have heard prayers… some of them just moans and cries… but prayers nonetheless…. Prayers for sick family members, for caregivers who were leaving to take other jobs, for pets who had died years before, for people in foreign lands who were hungry or lonely or frightened… And when one Sunshine friend was overcome by tears for the sadness of a prayer you would have heard

comforting words spoken by another sitting close by… along with a hand placed on a shoulder…

During "The Thanksgiving ABC Game", just when you thought folks would say things like "A is for apple" and "G is for gravy" and "T is for turkey," you'd hear them say totally unexpected things like "A is for affection," and "G is for gratitude" and "T is for tender loving care."

And when Sunshine service was over and it was time to go to the fellowship hall for cookies and punch, you'd hear Redeemer people who had been at the "official perfect Lutheran service" that morning say about Sunshine service, "Now **that** was church," or, "I felt God's Spirit so present when people were praying aloud, with all their hearts… why don't Lutherans do that?" or, "Why can't we do Sunshine service on Sunday morning?"

If you'd been at a Sunshine Service you would have begun to understand what Paul meant in his letter to the Corinthians when he said that God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise and chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong… **Because there was no way to miss it…**

(And just as an aside, if you had been with this pastor in the Hannaford Supermarket on Broadway in Bangor a few years back, you would have seen one of our Sunshine Service friends, Scott, point to me upon my entrance into the produce department… You would have seen his face light up upon seeing me, and you have heard him declare to his care giver, as well as to everyone else moving amongst the vegetables and fruits, "That girl goes to my church!" And you have seen this pastor moved to tears for the sheer beauty of feeling herself included in Scott's foolish little band of what the world calls "losers").

As for me, it is the memory and the image of Sunshine Service that comes to mind when I try to understand Paul's scandalous proclamation that **"Christ crucified" is the source of our wisdom and strength**… not because the memory and image of Sunshine Service brings me to some glorious moment when I can declare, "Now I've got the answer! Now I understand!"

But because in the presence of those whom the world deems worthless, I sensed in their shared vulnerability, in their deep care for one another, in their capacity for finding joy in the midst of wheel chairs and blindness and brokenness and loss… I sensed in their presence the presence of a love so foolish it has a whole different way of determining the value of things… a love so foolish it prefers the **cacophony** of Sunday afternoon at Redeemer Lutheran Church over the **perfection** of Sunday morning… a love so foolish it will go to the place of deepest loss and deepest pain + to say, "You will find something here the world does not understand… **You will find something here if you aren't there…** (The "you" that is, that is so full of itself… so full of the need for perfection and adulation, so full of the things the world values most, it has no capacity for letting anything else in; not even God… not even love). You will find something here that the world, in all its strength and wisdom does not understand… "

Do I understand it? No. I don't. I only know that by **standing under** it +… by standing under such foolish love and allowing it to make the space necessary for it to enter my depths – the inner region beyond knowing where I begin to sense that this foolish love holds even me – Only then and there do I have a chance of becoming foolish myself…

Made foolish by love, through love, for the sake of love, for the sake of the world God so loves… along with my friends from Sunshine Service, and everyone else willing to become fools for Christ, in whose

foolishness and weakness is to be found a wisdom and a strength, a joy and a peace that passes all understanding…