

# THE POWER OF GOD

I Corinthians 1:18-31; Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, a  
January 30, 2011

The Reverend Anne H.K. Apple  
Idlewild Presbyterian Church

*One who makes our wilderness like Eden,  
One who is the Source of our life,  
We look upon you from this sanctuary today,  
Because Your steadfast love is better than life.  
Startle us with your wisdom and power.  
Amen.*

## 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 (NRS)

*18 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. 19 For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." 20 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? 21 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. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. 26 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. 27 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; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God. 30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."*

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Last year, with a spirit of gratitude massaging my heart and driving west on Highway 72 in Mississippi, I sang along and aloud with James Taylor's Christmas CD:

*Who sends this song upon the air  
To soothe the soul that's aching  
To still the cry of deep despair  
To heal the heart that's breaking?*

Headed home from an ordination service of a young woman in Alabama, I had four hundred miles behind me and only one hundred to go when our minivan broke down, thanks to a snapped

engine coil. It died and my journey home stopped, abruptly. No limping along. No slowly losing speed – just stopped.

Sitting in the dried out bones of our family van in an Exxon parking lot off US 72, every few minutes I'd go into the store where Sheronda worked, greeted consumers and guarded the register. I'd refill my cup of Maxwell House and together we'd rehearse the same set of questions.

“Still broke down?” “*Yup.*”

“That ain't too good.” “*Nope.*”

“Your daddy's coming to get you, right?” “*Soon, I hope. Soon.*”

Our exchange was shallow rhetoric guarding the passage of time while I waited in Corinth. Sunday evening, instead of pulling into Memphis, I sat alone waiting. With the hood up, I anticipated my parent's arrival and my rescue.

While I was waiting, a Ford F-100, a shade of washed-out-harvest-orange with dull silver stripes pulled into the parking spot next to me. As “Frank” got out of his truck with his belly in the lead, a voice hollered from inside the bowels of the truck – “Yo – Frank, Git me some smokes, red pack, unfiltered.” Certainly strains of Hank Williams were fading from the speakers.

As sure as I shook my head at the absurdity of the slice of Corinth I was observing, my parent's pulled up in their Belize Blue Honda Hybrid. My father went to look under the hood as mother pulled out an Agnes Stark tray with whole wheat club crackers, Pink Lady apple slices and cubes of Colby Jack cheese saying, “Here sweetie, have a cracker and some cheese.” All that was missing was a cloth napkin and a glass of chardonnay.

It hit me in that instant of observation — I live and participate in a divided world. The divide between country and city, poor versus rich, PhD versus GED, fit versus fat, and rich versus poor.

Division among God's people was splayed open along a road home to Memphis in rural Mississippi. But that divide isn't unique, it pushes into the walls of the church as well — red hymnal or blue, bulletins or projections, aging or emerging, conservative or liberal, rich or poor, gay or straight.

Lord, how evident is division today: a canyon between City schools and County schools, canyons between rich and poor — when hedge fund manager John Paulson makes five billion dollars in a year and the State of Tennessee struggles with a hundred million dollar cut in TennCare. One man making 50 times what our State needs to provide care for some of our neediest citizens.

Paul's letter to the church in Corinth spoke to a divided people.

Paul preached about the cross of Christ; first, absurd to some non-believers who would rather ascend the limestone summit of the Acrocorinth, and worship at Aphrodite's Temple. Second, and back down in Corinth, within the early Christian community, Paul's preaching pushed into a divided people.

There were disputes about the totality of freedom<sup>1</sup> which Christ offered; for some Jews, the freedom Christ offered from the law was absurd.

There were arguments around how the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues was to be used, and whether it represented a sign of being in the Spirit (sure am glad that's not a litmus test today).

And then there were divisions around the denial of the resurrection of the dead.<sup>2</sup>

All week I've been trying to narrow down and whittle away at what this letter from Paul to a divided people in ancient days in Corinth means to us in Memphis. And out of my life as both mother and basketball coach, it comes down to words I learned from a coaching mentor, Ashley LaRue. Ashley would teach the girls to say "Wooo Sahn" — and she would call the words from the sidelines. They were the imaginary and nonsensical words the Idlewild high school girls' basketball team would say together when they needed a reminder that they were *one* team, called to play together, no matter the elbows being thrown, no matter the height or speed of the opponents, no matter how many points they were down by. The words communicated, "Settle down, play the game and do things the right way." *Wooo Sahn*.

Simply put, Paul's letter speaks a "wooo sahhh" into a divided community. Paul tells us that God's power puts the basis of every one of our divisions on its head. The divisions of rich and poor, noble and serf, strong and weak, gay and straight — those divisions are based on worldly measures. How big is your school system, how many billions in your bonus, how rich in scripture and spirit — Those comparisons mean nothing in the living and proclaiming of the Word.

Paul says to us, as he said to the Corinthians centuries ago,

*"Those of you who gather and proclaim Christ crucified,  
singing hymns and reading scripture, consider your calling."*

To believe in the foolishness of the proclamation of Christ crucified is to proclaim the power of God — and to know that God acts first.

To believe in the wisdom of Christ and the power of God is to live our lives not in the competitive and combative ways of the world, but in the ways that God's wisdom weaves our lives together.

To believe in the power of God is to live in the raw vulnerability that our human pride can yield to a trusting humility.

So, take the time to sit at the bedside of one who feels exposed and cries, "Oh God, Help me." Pray with her.

Celebrate with another who has lived a century saying, “Because of God ...” Sing with her.

Confront one who struggles with addiction with tough love, saying because you can, “With God, “I believe in you.” Hold his hand.

All three people, showered in a love “foolish” and “absurd” by the world’s standards.

Proclaim Jesus Christ, speaking about a love that is absurdly forgiving.

Pray without ceasing, “For God knows the plans God has for us, plans for our welfare, and not for harm, to give us a future with hope. God hears us when we call and pray.”<sup>1</sup>“

In our prayers, might we celebrate God’s power and wisdom – and trust that it is God’s power and wisdom, in Jesus...

*Who sends songs of unity and peace upon the air  
Who soothes souls that ache  
Who stills the cries of deep despair  
Who heals the hearts that break.*

*That* — even in the face of division — is God’s power.

Might it be so.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 6:12 “all things are lawful”

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor 15:12-34 “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 29:11-14 As I understand God’s providence and the power of prayer through the lens of the prophet.