

Camille Cook Murray
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
Georgetown Presbyterian Church

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Glad of another death
United - Part 1

Imagine you have just found a letter from a distant relative. It is old and frayed. It has a musty smell. It is weighty, several pages, at least. Someone with great care and precision has written this letter; someone else with equal care and precision has preserved this letter. You haven't yet read the letter and yet you already know that what is inside was important and may still be important. You hold the envelope carefully. You think about whether or not you should open the letter. You wonder if the author would mind you seeing their words. You fear the recipient of the letter would feel betrayed or embarrassed by your reading its contents. You wonder what is the right thing to do. After some time you decide you will read the letter but with gentleness, with respect, and with great advertence. After you read it and maybe read it again, you will decide what to do next, and what if anything the letter means to you. You open the envelope...

This could be exactly how we approach our letter today. The letter from a man named Paul to some of his dearest friends in an ancient Mediterranean city called Corinth. It was a letter written many decades ago with great care and precision – and also great hope. Paul may or may not have intended this letter to be passed from his friends to others but certainly he never could have predicted generations later that Christians would still be reading his words. But Paul's friends, the Corinthians, given the contents of the letter portraying them in an unflattering light, would not have wanted it to be circulated widely.

At the time of this letter, there were a few house churches in Corinth. Maybe 30-50 members per church maybe half a dozen or so churches – so we are talking about 150-200 Corinthian Christians who received this letter. It is a letter to help them correct their ways, a letter to inspire them in the faith, a letter to ground them in truth. As we embark on a six-week study of this text it is important for us to remember that we are reading someone else's private mail. We should treat it with respect, be open minded about what we might discover, and be prepared to be surprised and inspired by its contents.

If you have read 1 Corinthians one hundred times before and think you know it well – try reading with new eyes. If you have never read this letter before – then you are in for a treat – for it is a text filled with passion, poetry, conflict, and Paul's strong theology woven throughout. Paul's goal at the end of his letter is to convert the minds of the Corinthians. He wants to have a 'conversion of the imagination' as scholar Richard Hayes says or to put it in Paul's language have a "renewing of their minds." By the time the Corinthian's finish reading the letter they are supposed to see the world, and their lives, and their faith in a completely different way. So as we gently and thoughtfully hold this letter and begin to read it, let us prepare ourselves for the renewing of our minds.

The first thing Paul needs to do in this letter is tear down the traditional notions of wisdom and give the Corinthians a new paradigm. Corinth is a status driven city – it is a place where education and power and influence and family connections matter. Paul immediately wants to shatter the notions the Corinthians carry about wisdom. This would have been his main objective – to convert their imaginations to a new understand of divine wisdom. But get ready because this notion of wisdom is hard to understand, completely foreign, and totally radical. The new paradigm, for Paul, is 100% about the cross. God chose to save the world through the cross. This is the central paradox of the gospel, that the cross, a symbol of oppression, torture, and death could be used by God to display ultimate power and eternal wisdom and victory over death. As Paul says famously, “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.” Or say it another way: if you believe it then it looks like redemption. If you don’t believe it then it looks like utter foolishness.

Paul says, “We proclaim Christ crucified.” This is a scandalous thing to say. We proclaim Christ crucified. We profess faith in a man who was put to death by crucifixion, a gruesome form of punishment administered by the Romans to make an example out of criminals. The cross was a public sign that no one should try to disrupt the powers that be. And yet, we proclaim Christ crucified. We proclaim that in the crucifixion of Jesus, God did in fact triumph over those exact powers. This is true wisdom; this is true power. To believe in this is to have a conversion of our imagination.

Paul turns everything over with paradigm of the cross. What is rich is poor. What is high is low. What is wise is foolish. What is death is life. We must experience a conversion of the imagination in order to believe. We have just celebrated Christmas, which is its own paradoxical reversal – where we all stop our lives to celebrate the humble birth of a tiny baby thousands of years ago. With Jesus, the paradox begins on day one. That is what you discover when you start trying to figure out the ways of Jesus, what it means to believe in Christ’s wisdom, and how you go about being a follower of Jesus – there are a lot of reversals, and paradoxes, and surprising revelations of truth.

T.S. Eliot in his famous poem, *The Journey of the Magi*, often read at Epiphany, describes the journey of a sole wise man traveling to meet Jesus and realizing the enormous reversal that is upon him. Listen to the end of the poem:

And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,

But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

The Magi asks, “Were we led all that way for birth or for death?” The birth of Jesus marked a kind of death for the magi. It was the death of his former worldview, where he was regarded as rich and powerful and wise – now he found himself bowing at the feet of a poor child in a stable. After you have experienced His birth how then can you return to your place and be anything else but uneasy. Were we led all that way for birth or for death? The answer of course is yes. We have been led into the faith so that the things we carried previously, our false notions, our false gods, our false hopes would be cast aside and the wisdom of God would replace them. We were led all this way for death and for birth. Bishop Rowan Williams remarked about this poem, “Eliot never wanted to present religious faith as a nice cheerful answer to everyone's questions, but as an inner shift so deep that you could hardly notice it, yet giving a new perspective on everything and a new restlessness in a tired and chilly world.”

If that were so, then T.S. Eliot would have appreciated what Paul was trying to do. The shock waves of the birth of Christ, the shock waves of the death of Christ, the shockwaves of the resurrection of Christ would radically change the minds of those who came to believe. As Isaac Watts proclaims, “a love so amazing and so divine” that it demands “our souls, our lives, our all.” We cannot return to our places unchanged – a renewing of our minds, a conversion of our imaginations, a salvation of our souls. Paul yearned for the Corinthian’s to be converted. Converted to the cross. Converted to Jesus. Converted from death to birth – new life in Christ. The paradox is that with the death of our former worldview, our former selves – we experience true life in Christ. What seems foolish and weak is utter wisdom and absolute strength. If that shocking event is revelation of the deepest truth about the character of God, then our whole way of seeing the world is turned upside down. God’s shocking intervention to save and transform the world – Paul’s theory of the cross – is repeated again and again throughout this letter. The answer for Paul is always the cross. For Christians, our worldview always returns to the cross. Where power is overturned. And wisdom is redefined. And salvation is embodied.

Have we come all this way for birth or for death? If the death is the death of our pride, the death of our sin, the death of our constant need to perform, to strive, to try and save ourselves – then we should be glad of another death. Jesus Christ, was born to save. Paul calls you to embrace the paradox, accept the death of your former selves, and embrace a new life in Jesus Christ. This is a call he will make over and over to the Corinthians. This is a call, which needs to be made over and over to us. Read this letter, hear God’s word, and embrace a new year, a new chapter, a new life in Jesus Christ.

As the beloved Christmas carol sings:

*Good Christians all rejoice,
with heart and soul and voice
Now ye need not fear the grave:
Peace! Peace!
Jesus Christ was born to save.*

Thanks be to God for birth, for death - for truth, wisdom, and salvation.

Amen.