

Christians are blessed | 1Cor. 1:18-31; Matthew 5: 1-12 | LUMC | January 29, 2023

Dear Church family and friends: Paul is back again with a sharp and painfully piercing message we may not want to hear. Recall that last week he was searching our hearts regarding honesty, gossiping and illegal meetings some church members were organizing to hurt others. He singled out few faithful people who were gutsy and exposed those meetings for the benefit of a healthy Christian unity and fellowship.

Paul was also alerting us how human-made cultural teachings interfere with church life and make some members pay greater allegiance to their cultural beliefs than to their faith teachings. In explaining how culture affects Christian faith, he powerfully explained the Greek concept of wisdom that affected their faithful living. The Greeks of his time believed faith must be viewed through their cultural lenses. Those Greeks contrasted their belief in human wisdom with the Christian teachings. They wanted their cultural beliefs to rise above Christian teachings.

Today, Paul adds the Jews' cultural lenses; that is, their demand for signs or a miracle to so believe. This Jewish belief is widespread in the Old Testament. Gideon demanded a sign to believe God was calling him into a judgeship position for the Israelites. When Saul was told to become the king of Israel, he demanded a sign that it was God calling him. And God did not desert him. Jesus used signs of Jonah as a metaphor to describe his future crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection. Demanding signs becomes the Jews' stumbling block to believing Jesus for salvation of their souls.

The revelation that long-held cultural teachings are human beliefs that interfere with Christian faith, made me go through what I was taught about God, by my clan, my relatives, and my people. I have examined and found some teachings I must address. My culture never recognized women as prophets and being sacrificial leaders, but as followers of men into those activities. I am indebted to the Methodist Church for teaching against gender discrimination and offering a chance to practice my call—the call to reach out to all people of God anywhere in the world, even where women are not recognized.

This revelation should cause us all to review if our culture is blocking our faith growth. Some cultures that are actively present make Christians fearful, especially to break them and free their spirit. Examples are where women are not totally free from men, yoked to them in subservient roles, or where everyone sees a foreigner as an anathema, a tick to be removed and cast into the fire, or where a community feels it is either “our way or the highway”. We need to examine carefully if our role is being wise by human standards, or being described as “foolish” for following Jesus according to our cultural beliefs.

Paul and Jesus tell us that Christian teachings are counter-cultural. Paul encourages Christians to believe in Jesus for their salvation, even though some cultures of the time viewed that simply believing is foolish. Paul strongly asserts that those who despise the message of the cross, instead believing in a human created

temporary utopia of “feel good”, will finally perish. Those who believe in Jesus are being saved by the power of the cross, and receive the power of God.

Paul is being real in asking each of us to consider how we became Christians and to acknowledge that it's not because we were better than non-Christians. We did nothing to warrant our calling; it was God's choice to shame those still stuck on human wisdom mediated by human cultures. God uses you and me to let the worldly people know that God's plan is not patterned on human plans, and God is not directed by humans on God's choices.

I am vividly aware that God decided to call each of us to shame the world built on human wisdom, a human culture that is not mutually equitable. Our calling into Christian faith is purposed to create a new world order where Jesus is the source of life, and the wisdom of God. The righteous Jesus' goal is to redeem and sanctify those who believe in and can “boast because of the Lord”.

While Paul this week is including every Christian in the call, last week he said Christians are known by bearing Christian fruits. Elsewhere, Jesus' disciples ask him the marks of a true Christian, and how the public will know a true Christian. Jesus answered by saying, “You will know them by the fruits of the spirit they bear”.

Jesus is categorical that God's blessings are awarded to genuine Christians. These are Christians entering into Jesus' reign who enjoy being sons and daughters of God. Their faith is tested, they've won the test, and God approves them to enjoy eternity here and hereafter.

St Mathew heard Jesus clearly announcing the number of blessings these genuine Christians shall receive for winning the earthy tests.

The first blessing is awarded to those who acknowledge their own helplessness and rely on God's power to save them and help them overcome self-weakness. They know they want the spiritual connection only God provides. This type of belief takes human power of “I can do”, and invites God to respond to the question, “Lord, can we do this together? Please?” The Lord always supplies their needs. This virtue rejects self-praise and bragging.

Jesus also awards blessings to those of us who experience sorrow as we fellowship with Jesus on hurts meted out to us by others. This type of sorrow is also caused by others who reject Jesus and totally live in the worldly situation around us. I have heard Christians expressing sorrow regarding terrible family values, the vandalizing of church structures, the minimizing of the Constitution of the land, the illegal plans to hurt others emotionally, and the outright denial of other people's rights. Christians who mourn these issues do so with Jesus, and Jesus blesses their prayers and actions.

There is another blessing for the meek, those who accept lowly positions, gentle persons in their own causes. Meek people defend other people's rights against those who violate them. They are disturbed by injustice. They openly challenge the powerful, and their firm stand results in their incurring some abuses.

Some of you know about our members years ago who were openly despised when they decided to stand with the minority in our city and beyond. They stayed on the corner of Front Street and Stremler drive for many days. Some of you witnessed a house smeared with eggs, and you know that some compound signboards were removed. Dear Lord, this leads me to raise a question with you: are these meek people treated this way inheriting the earth or are they a scorn and shame? Speaking on human terms, I am sure it's a shame and scorn for the time being. But finally, the meek people will enjoy eternity with God here and later. The opposite of meek people are those Christians who fear to be counted with those suffering under human-created values.

Jesus will also award blessings for those who hunger for justice, honesty, and integrity of the word of God, like Chloe's family we encountered last week. This people's hunger can only be satisfied in Jesus' reign. Their desire and passion for righteousness no human culture can offer except in the reign of Jesus Christ. If we are compassionate to others, God will be compassionate to us and count us forgiven by the power of the cross. We can expect God to offer us blessings for being kind to others. God's unconditional gift of mercy despite our being persecuted, minimized, and run over by the power of human culture, is unmatched.

Jesus deals with pure hearts that are undiluted; their thoughts are pure, holy and consciously clean. These will not only inherit eternity but will see God and enjoy the fellowship. May we desire these and more blessings awarded to the Christian who have singleness' of spirit, passion for mission, and desire to live according the word of God. I like being in the company of these Christians and being open to praying and inviting those with mixed life-styles to decide to be Christlike.

The reason Jesus brings this view of his reign early in the year is to encourage us to keep aware that we are people of the cross, that we are called into righteousness, and into joyful and peaceful living under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
Amen