

WGUMC September 18, 2016 Stumbling to Salvation  
I Corinthians 1:18-31

A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not travel on it,  
but it shall be for God's people;  
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.  
[Isaiah 35:8]

Isaiah talks about a highway of holiness. But when Paul headed for Damascus, he took the freeway of self-righteousness. Paul was so sure he was right and so eager to persecute the followers of Jesus that he was doing 85 in the fast lane to get to Damascus. For him, the problem with the People of the Way, as the first Christians were called, is that they were like a bunch of hippies on a bus going the wrong way, traveling in the wrong direction. Everyone knows how dangerous that is on the freeway. When the world is going one direction and you decide to go another, chances are you'll get run over.

Which is why Paul's turn-around on the road to Damascus is so surprising to us. Plenty of people thought he was crazy. When he preached the gospel to the Roman Governor of Judea, Festus said to him, "You are out of your mind...Too much learning is driving you insane!" [Acts 26:24]

But it wasn't that Paul had too much learning. I think it was that Paul finally got enough love. The only thing I know that can bring about such a radical change in someone's life direction is love. It changes the way you think and act and it can make you crazy. I told you about the blue polyester pants that Hank was wearing on our first date. And I married him anyway! So I think what happened is that Paul fell in love after he met Jesus on the road. At first, he was blinded by the light. Then, a few days later, a believer by the name of Ananias came and laid hands on him. The text says, "immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored." [Acts 9:18]

As I wondered what that could mean, I thought about all the fear and the hate that had blinded him, all the ignorance, prejudice, and self-righteousness that had filled him. And I imagined all that falling away in the moment that Ananias laid hands on him and the Holy Spirit poured God's forgiving love into him. Now Paul could see the world through his lover's eyes, through God's eyes.

I don't think we can overestimate the power of that experience for Paul. I don't think we can know how profoundly love changed his perspective on everything. Up to that point, the world was working for him. He was busy enforcing its rules, feeding its intolerance, and perpetuating its violence. Now he could see how wrong he had been. Whether it was an instantaneous insight or a gradual realization, it doesn't matter. The fact is that love and mercy made Paul do a 180 in the middle of the freeway.

Love, they say, makes the world go round, but in Paul's case, it also turned it upside down. Paul joined the people of The Way and began proclaiming a love that came in the shape of a cross. Paul knew that his "message about the cross" sounded strange, even foolish [1 Cor 1:18, 21]. Preaching "Christ crucified" did not make him a crowd pleaser. [1:22]

That's because the Messiah was not supposed to be a loser. No one wants a king whose crown is made of thorns and whose throne is a cross of wood. We want our savior to succeed. We want our God to be victorious. Agreed?

For that reason, the cross was a stumbling block for Jews. They didn't need another defeat. They had been abused enough. They wanted to be saved *from* suffering, not *through* suffering. They were looking for a sign of God's power, not God's weakness. They wanted a miracle not a debacle.

And we do, too. We live in Silicon Valley where we love power and worship the gods and goddesses of technology. We

are told to believe in Moore's Law not Moses' Law. We are promised that everything is going to get smarter and faster, stronger and better. So what do we make of a God who "chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise...chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong...chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are..."? [I Cor 27-28]

The truth that Paul could see when the scales fell from his eyes is that what the world needs most is not more smarts or more speed or more strength, but a lot more love. There are so many love-starved places in our world. For instance, if Paul were on the road to Damascus today, he literally would be blown away. The King in Damascus, King Assad, has no love. He stayed in power for the last five years by killing his own people. By contrast, Christ showed us the power of love by letting people kill him. For the world we live in, that is pretty crazy.

So the cross is a stumbling block for a lot of us. But Paul preaches not only Christ crucified; he also preaches Christ glorified. Now that should have been good news except that the whole idea of resurrection was foolishness to the Gentiles.

The Greeks loved ideas, but they hated this idea of a dead body being resurrected. To the Greeks, the body was full of pain and pollution. They wanted to leave it, not keep it. So for the Greeks, the resurrection was an assault to their reason.

And many of us today have the same problem. We put a lot of faith in reason. With our brains we can do a lot of things. We can define and control things. In a sense, that's what science and technology are all about: manipulating and controlling our environment through the use of our reason. So where does that leave the resurrection? It has no reasonable explanation.

God's love has no good reason. But Paul fell for it anyway. To a people who wanted power, he preached death on a cross.

To a people who valued reason, he preached the mystery of the resurrection. No wonder Paul got himself thrown into prison! All because the world doesn't know what to do with a paradox when it stumbles on one.

I couldn't think of a good example of a paradox last night last night. This morning I realized that I woke up next to one. My husband is a Jew who practices as a Roman Catholic and who married a Methodist pastor and works for a Muslim organization and consults with a Native American Indian tribe. You can't get more paradoxical than that! In my life, the only thing you can do with a paradox is fall in love with it!

The central message of Paul's preaching is that the cross is the ultimate paradox: it is the weakness that wields great power; it is the shame that leads to glory; it is the brokenness that makes everything whole; it is the death that becomes the source of all life. The cross is the foolishness of God that is wiser than human wisdom. It is not a problem to be solved or

an argument to be proved. It is a mystery that has to be lived and loved.

So on the freeway of life, it only seems foolish to fall in love with God. Because love will turn you around and make you go in the opposite direction. While it is dangerous, it is not foolish. I drive to the redwoods on Friday mornings to work out my sermon while I run. Highway 17 is dangerous in any direction, but when I see the traffic stacked up on the northbound side of the road, I am not feeling foolish. I'm feeling free! Loving God is like getting to drive against the commute.

I usually listen to NPR on the way but sometimes the news of the day is so disheartening that I think the world is like this freeway, with too many people going in the wrong direction, away from the ocean, the mountains, the trees! It seems that lately many people are taking the same the road that Paul had taken, the road of self-righteousness and intolerance. You see it in our driving habits, in our social media habits, and in our

politics. So much traffic is on that road now that we are in a constant state of gridlock. Our public life has become a pile-up, a parking lot.

Fortunately, I happen to know that there is an alternate route. There is an off-ramp just up ahead. You won't find it on Waze, but Paul points us to the way. The cross may seem a little crazy, but it is the way of Christ who is "the power of God and the wisdom of God." [I Cor 1:24]

Everything else Paul has to say starts here at the cross, the inflection point of God's love for the world. All of us will one day stumble over it. Paul did. But then he made a wise move and became a fool for Christ. You can, too. When you fall down, just let yourself fall in love. And if life runs you over, know that his cup of salvation runs over, too. It is poured out for me. It is poured out for you.