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The Third Sunday after Epiphany

The Reverend Garrett Yates
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

1 Corinthians 1:18



It's not looking good.

Those are dreaded words. It's not looking good.

How are the Patriots looking?

How's my portfolio doing?

I have your test results back, do you have a moment?

I was hoping the marriage would work out; as my friend, tell me the truth, what do you think?

A parishioner passed along an *Atlantic* article to me this past week called "American Religion is Not Dead Yet." The captioned picture was of an abandoned gray building that looked more like a haunted house than a church. Joy. Even if you haven't read the article, you've probably read one like it. Newsflash: institutional religion really isn't appealing to people under 40, and lots of people are writing about it. Churches, so articles like this remind us, are struggling to attract new, younger families to replace the older faithfuls. Church buildings are closing; congregations are folding. The ones that haven't are typically getting smaller; less robust attendance; smaller children's programs; leaner budgets. More stressed out clergy, discouraged clergy... thinking they were joining the great Ark of the Church, sailing confidently through the tides of history, with the winds of Christendom at its back; now they are in leaky life boats bucketing water over the side.

We shouldn't be surprised by all this: fewer and fewer people have been buying it really since the 1960's. No mainline denomination –Presbyterians, Methodists, us– have grown in membership since 1965. It's true. The Episcopal Church is hardly half the size we were 50 years ago. Explanations abound: people are busier now; life is more stressful than it used to be, the rising tide of secularism; other forms of spirituality are more easily accessible; institutions are the devil; the sheer, overweening nature of youth sports. The Church has heard any number of these. American religion is not dead yet - sure; but it's not looking good.

Dreaded words.

Well, St. Paul had high hopes for the Christians in Corinth. We know he had a lot of correspondence with them; two letters have survived, though scholars think there were four letters he penned, two of them sadly lost. The Corinthians were a

troublesome lot, which shouldn't surprise us since Corinth itself wasn't exactly Mayberry; it's been said to be the Las Vegas of the Ancient World. In this morning's text, the parishioners at Corinth, so we infer from Paul's admonition, are struggling with clergy cliques. Some of them preferred Joe, some preferred Garrett, and some just wish a Kate would jump back in. "Why are you so divided?" Paul exclaims. Beyond these disputes, there was other craziness going on in the Corinthian Church. Drunkenness, folks taking each other to court, and, oh yea, casual sexual liaisons and perhaps orgies. You can imagine a friend of Paul's asking him how the Church in Corinth was doing.

It's not looking good, comes the reply from the apostle.

Wendy Cage and Ellen Babchuck, authors of the *Atlantic* article and both Jewish laywomen, suggest that religion traditionally checks four boxes in peoples' lives: it provides a sense of meaning and gives people the tools to make meaning from their experience; it provides them rituals to mark the sacred and difficult times in their life; it proffers a sense of belonging; and, fourth, it inspires prophetic witness and action. If you still think the Church has something to offer, chances are you are believing one or all of these things still work, still speak. Cage and Babchuck's contention is that while churches and synagogues are in decline, the longing for these four things isn't. People are just finding them in different places. In book groups, yoga studios, conversations with chaplains, and social action affinity groups.

I sometimes read articles like this and can't help but wonder what St. Paul would make of it all. Would he have us double-down on meaning making strategies, have us focus more on inclusivity and belonging? Maybe. Would he remind us of the sacredness of the rites of baptism and Eucharist and anointing the sick? Possibly. Would he have the dying Church get more prophetic, more socially active? Potentially. What would he say? I'm not certain, but if I could venture a guess, I think he'd tell us what he told the Christians in Corinth when he said:

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.

To my mind, this is one of the key statements of Paul. If you want to understand who he was, and what he was about, and what he thought about the world, this is it. To the dying Church

he holds up a symbol of foolishness, and says, “Here, look here.” I find the Greek even more compelling. The word for “message,” as in “message about the cross,” is *logos*; where we get our word *logic*. Paul tries to persuade his hearers into a different logic, a logic we might call the logic of the cross.

His hearers would have detected the same irony you do. The cross doesn’t hold any logic. It’s the antithesis of logic. One man tortured on an instrument of national terrorism. An anointed Messiah bleeding out in a place reserved for slaves and rebels of the state, where they all were left up to hang, their bodies food for the birds – what do you mean the logic of the cross?

One of the things I love about Paul is that he is very slow to work out exactly what these sorts of statements mean on the ground. He just sort of pulls the pin and lobbs these theological grenades into his hearers laps, and says *here, here is what I’m thinking; why don’t you think about it; try it on for size*. Paul was a mystic, too intoxicated by what he’d experienced to ever be a pragmatist. And so we read him as closely and as best we can, and make what sense there is of this illogical logic. This logic we call the Logic of the Cross.

To be clear, Paul’s Christianity is not the celebration of a divine victim. There were hundreds of thousands of criminals who died on Roman crosses, and God does nothing but weep by those unmarked graves. When we talk about the logic of the cross, we aren’t glorifying suffering. Nor are we talking about something abstract happening in and through it, like God’s wrath being appeased by a sin-offering. There are lots of Christian camps who want to turn this strange logic into a tame logic, that has an odd ability to affirm them, and stave off their doubts. The logic of the cross, also I should say, isn’t about the power of non-violent demonstration, as if it could be reduced to a principle of community organizing. The logic of the cross is not first and foremost about one man’s death, but about his Life. What was this Life?

The Gospels all agree. Here was a life that was fully attuned to the needs of others. A life that was awake and alive to the colors of the world – one who couldn’t help but see the world as one shimmering parable of Divine Love. A life poured out to affirm the luminous beauty in all things, not from some sapless duty but from the overflowing fullness in him. He met people who

had been broken by sin and loss and suffering, and helped them put back the pieces of their squandered dignity. A life that was principled to be sure: he was against so many things like riches, adultery, and anger; but he felt compassion for the rich man, embraced the adulterer, and healed those self-wounded by their own anger. The logic of the cross is about a life that didn't see the world as perishing but as One charged by Saving Power. This illogical logic takes the report that says, "it's not looking good," and transcends it by cleaving to that Saving Power, that isn't known for always making bad things good, so much as making dead things live again.

Can the Corinthians see this logic; can they trust that Saving Power? that Power that sustains all things? that floods all being with life and beauty? that blankets the world in justice and camaraderie? that draws near to the individual heart and warms it with a fire not made, and thus never spent?

I said I liked Paul because he doesn't always have the answers on how it all works out at the local level. I mean sure, he tries, but he's so often saying odd things about women not speaking or wearing headdresses; sometimes he tries to apply his vision to marriage and there's all sorts of cultural baggage he isn't able to part from. I think Paul would be the first to tell you that he didn't get it all right. At one point, he told one church, "I am the chief of sinners." But nevertheless he holds out this Saving Power that he's experienced, felt, tasted, been upended by, and says, "What might this mean if we started living by another logic?"

It would have to mean a few things. But maybe most of all it'd mean a community that formed to worship and adore and sing to that Sacred Power and Mystery. And they would do this as they shared their journey through life together. The highs and the lows. The kids and the grandkids, and the new faces and the old faces, too. They would hold one another's hand through heartbreak and shame, and especially in those darkest of nights. That's actually the place where church is best seen. Where the Light burns the brightest. Oh, I've seen the light of this Holy Light, among you: in hospital rooms; as hands were held during a rocky patch; in humble prayers offered; in one's steely perseverance after losing their spouse, in another's joy as they finally admitted their addiction, and another's patient and tender caring of her husband as he slipped off into another thought world. A community that lives by the logic of the cross sees the whole

world differently, sees themselves differently.

It's not looking good.

How much energy do we spend trying to stave off those words? We all have those places in us that we've determined don't "look good." We've hidden those places away by success, and busyness, and consumption. We've taken our shame and regret and put them in boxes down in the basement of our souls where no one goes. We hide from ourselves, and from the world; we don't do it consciously. One of the sneaky ways people like us hide is by being nice. Being a people pleaser. Some have curated a self that avoids conflict at all costs – even at the cost of our sanity – so that was is "not good" in us isn't shaken loose and seen; being nice all the time is a way to hide from ourselves. That "not good" part of us.

The church won't be healed if it continues to live in denial. Oh, we've got to own up to our sins. And part of me, reading articles like I did in the *Atlantic*, isn't too bothered by the reports that the church is dying. I read that and think, "About time. So much of the Church needs to die." The sexism, the white supremacy, the colonialist spirit; the Establishment Church; the church that won't talk about money and class. That won't get its hands dirty in politics and instead doles out vapid spirituality to keep the consumers happy. When young people look at the Church, when the historian looks at church history, I don't blame their honest assessment: It's not looking good.

Of course, to live by the Saving Power of the Cross isn't to be ashamed of the "not good." People who've learned this illogical logic are capable of repenting of their sins, their faults, their blind spots. They've given up the logic of self-justification. They aren't trying to preserve their own rightness so much as bear witness to the Power that preserves them through their wrongness. They don't get it all right, but they've already ceded the impulse to do that. They aren't concerned anymore with looking good; but about being truthful. They live not by themselves but by Saving Power.

The question for the Church isn't if it is dying or not. Paul invites us to a better question: *are we living more and more reliant upon that Power that created us and sustains us and saves us and impels us to extend its reign and rule to the world?* The question is not whether we get new people to come to church so

much as *how are being transformed by that Power that is making us and all things new*. The question has nothing to do with if we are educated, enlightened, or woke; it has to do with if we are letting this Luminous Power wake us up from our slumbers of self-deception and clichéd perspective. Paul’s invitation isn’t to adopt a new program, a new marketing strategy, a new political opinion: he wants Christians to live by a different logic. The Church can live by the narrative of decline and death, or we can ask how the Power and Life that raises the dead is coming more alive through and in us.

The Power we speak of is that illogical logic of the cross: a logic that hears those dreaded words, “It’s not looking good”; leans in closer to the dark silence, and maybe lets an anticipatory smile ease across the face: for we trust that there is a surer and stronger voice about to speak.

Sources:

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