



First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC
Third Sunday in Lent
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The Big Upset, or Life in the form of a Cross

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The Lessons: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Like millions of sports fans who are undermining the nation's productivity this month, I have really been enjoying the NCAA college basketball tournament. I lost track of time this year, however, and so I was not as prepared for March Madness as I usually am. I've really had to scramble to arrange my calendar so that I can answer phone calls, make a few visits, conduct a couple of marriage preps, attend committee meetings, pray for all the people I promised to pray for, spend quality time with the Almighty contemplating the eternal verities, write a sermon or two, and still get to watch BC beat the heck out of Villanova in Minneapolis on Friday night—God willing.

One of the things true fans always hope for in the tournament is at least one Big Upset—the improbable victory of the nine hundredth seed over number one. You know, the skinny kids from the small rural campus of a poorly-funded State University, who wear really ugly uniforms and are coached by a rumpled old aw-shucks guy from Central Casting who's toiled in obscurity for forty-seven years and who now, on the brink of retirement, has finally got a team in the tourney and is coaching what everybody knows will be the last game of his career because his first opponent is Duke.

And then the magic happens. Out on the court the scrawny scrappers are in The Zone. You can't believe what you're seeing. Everything they throw at the backboard goes in. Meanwhile the Blue Devils have been replaced by aliens from outer space who don't

know how to run in sneakers, and before you know it, the bumpkins from Podunk have pulled even with a second to go, and they have the ball. *Of course* the desperate heave from half court goes in at the buzzer—nothing but net! Ozymandias, king of kings, look upon these ruins and despair! O How The Mighty Have Fallen! Depression settles over Durham, delirium breaks out in the heartland, and you are out six hundred bucks in the office pool.

Games like these become the stuff of legend, and no matter how much money you lose when a loser wins, it makes you glad to be alive. All the way to debtor's prison you bless the day you were born to see it. 'Fess up, all you sophisticates who profess to be indifferent at best to the world of sports—even you choke up when the water boy finally gets in the game and makes the play that saves the day. When David beats Goliath, Cinderella gets the Prince, and the Sox win the Series, you know that someday, somehow, everything really is going to be all right.

I love sports, but I don't usually like sports analogies in sermons. It's March Madness, however, so forgive me, here goes:

With all the talk in this morning's reading about the foolish supplanting the wise, the apostle Paul seems to have some money of his own riding on the underdog. He is writing to the church in the city of Corinth where he had lived and worked for three long years. It is a small congregation struggling to survive in an ultra-cosmopolitan social environment with plenty of opportunities for the wealthy and the talented to be Somebody.

The Corinthian church is made up of mostly low status members, but a few members are people of means and influence and, it appears, they are demanding a disproportionate share of attention. They insist on enjoying inside the church the same privileges and deference they enjoy outside. This sense of entitlement kicks up a good deal of resentment in the less affluent and less influential members of the church.

Others in the community have become devotees of a charismatic teacher who rose to prominence in the church after Paul's departure, and now these groupies are going around condescendingly dropping their guru's pearls of wisdom all over the place, shaming the hoi polloi who do not possess their superior knowledge or their gold standard of faith.

A woman named Chloe rats them all out to Paul, and he is horrified by the way pride of status and knowledge is driving a wedge into the unity of the church. And for Paul, lording your Lexus or your Ph. D. over the high school dropout and the welfare mom is not just a social faux pas, a simple matter of boorishness. It is a theological failure, a fundamental misreading of who God is and the way God works.

And so Paul sets about teaching. He doesn't content himself to tell them simply to cut it out and be nice to each other. He grounds his behavioral hopes for them in the pattern of God that he discerns in the cross. God's way is to choose the things that the world discards to show up the things that the world values. The prize should always go to the sleek and the strong, the smart and the influential, right? Paul advises his fractious Christians not to bet on it. And they shouldn't bet on it because they are mistaken about what is of worth. What looks like wisdom to worldly people is in fact foolishness. And what looks like foolishness to worldly people is in fact wisdom. And if you don't develop a discerning eye capable of penetrating this mystery, you will lose your shirt every time.

At the heart of this discernment is Jesus crucified, the message of the cross. Paul knows that the cross is a tough nut to crack. He admits that it is a ridiculous thing to preach faith in a divine savior who was executed, and in such a profoundly humiliating way. We do not, most of us, live in a shame and honor culture, so it is hard for us to grasp the shock to the system that Jesus' death provoked among his contemporaries. We are also accustomed to the cross. For 2000 years it has been the glorious badge of Western Civilization. It does not even seem odd to us to wear this little electric chair around our necks, or to use it to accessorize our fashionable outfits.

The first century cultured pagans, on the other hand, found the cross profoundly disturbing. The claims being made for the man who died on it struck them as shockingly absurd. Christian proclamation of the cross was nothing short of demeaning. And it was not only the sophisticated who found it outrageous. One of the earliest depictions of Christian beliefs comes to us in a mocking bit of graffiti found on a wall on Rome's Palatine Hill. It dates from around the year 200 and shows a cross upon which hangs the body of a man who has the head of a donkey. Underneath, the artist scrawled a caption, "Alexemonos worships his god."

The Hellenistic Jews and Gentiles to whom Paul is preaching go along with him just so far, he implies, and then they come to the stubborn fact of the cross and balk. But for Paul the cross is the key to healing and wholeness, to a right relationship with God, and to a new and revolutionary way of life—the church.

After the example of its crucified Lord, the church unwisely opens itself to people of every status, to the educated and the ignorant, to women as well as men, to the Jew, to the Greek—to people of every color and race. It deliberately looks foolish by creating new forms of family, caring for people who were not blood kin, wasting its resources on the stranger. It chooses to look weak by offering forgiveness in a violently stratified world where mercy is a luxury few prudent persons can afford.

For Paul, the church is cross-like in its form and practice—it looks like sheer folly, and everything it says and does in the world seems futile and out of joint. But God is working a miracle of reconciliation through this apparent foolishness, and for those who can see it, it is healing wisdom for them and for the world.

But the world—smart, self-sufficient and strong—does not think it needs anything. And so it does not place much stock in the scrawny team with its outrageous mascot who have come to town to play. But Paul knows that as long as the church remains cruciform, as long as entitlement and elitism and the lust for security and power do not erase the sign of God’s foolishness from the church’s body (which is Paul’s fear as he writes), the world will be in for a Big Upset. The outcome is assured.

Every Sunday we worship in this sanctuary under a cross. A very big cross. If any congregation should feel marked by the sign of the cross, it’s us! Today, then, I want to ask you if you think it really does mark us. Marks us in the way Paul thought it should, by casting a shadow of folly on us and inviting us to adopt permanently the role of God’s underdogs, the role of the fool. Do you feel like fools? Do you think we are particularly shocking to anyone? Do we shock ourselves?

One preacher¹ has observed that “one of the dangers of being in church as often as we are is that it all starts to make sense to us. We speak of the Christian faith so casually and effortlessly that we begin to think, ‘Fine thing, this Christianity. Makes good sense.’ And yet week after week we talk and act as if we believe all sorts of things in church that we wouldn’t let anyone put over on us in the *real* world. Stuff you would choke on in everyday speech, you somehow swallow in a prayer or a hymn or a sermon. ‘Blessed are the meek . . .,’ ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ ‘Love your enemies,’ ‘Go, sell all you have and give to the poor.’”

Standing here today under this cross, I wonder with that writer about the “tiresome tendency of the Christian faith, in our hands, to be transformed from sign of outrage and contradiction, insubordination and usurpation” into ho-hum everydayness and “the cement of social conformity.”

Standing here under this cross, I am, for example, acutely conscious, as I know you are, that today is the third anniversary of the start of war in Iraq. Under the cross, I grieve the loss of life and all the destruction of this true folly. But I also feel ashamed. I am ashamed that it is likely that First Church has not been infiltrated by the FBI, and that

¹ Will Willimon

it is likely that no one from some secret agency is listening in on my home telephone. We and I have given the world so little reason to regard us as a fool or a dupe or an enemy.

Are we living in a cross-shaped way, or have we gone over to the Duke Side? Are we repulsed and disappointed by a savior who won't save us on our own terms—namely, that we mustn't be asked or expected to give up our entitlement, our standard of living, our common sense, our liberal platitudes, our timid generosity, our limited hospitality, and our busy, talkative, anxious and sleep-deprived lives?

I stood near a different cross two weeks ago. It was a lot smaller than ours, no match for the gusty wind out on the Cambridge Common where Jed Mannis sets up his little communion table every week, rain, snow, or shine, serving the homeless women and men of the Outdoor Church by worshipping with them. I had gone out there with Sarah Higginbotham to deliver the sandwiches that our kids make for the members of that Church each month, and which we consecrate here at the communion table along with the bread and wine of communion.

I was going just to drop them off, but then I decided to stay. I was glad I did, because apart from Jed and a seminarian, at one o'clock when the service was supposed to start, I was the only one there. Not a homeless person in sight.

I thought to myself, "Now *this* is ministry. This is selfless service. You show up perseveringly week after week, and offer the gifts you have. It doesn't matter if no one comes. After all, it isn't about numbers, but persevering presence. It's an offering, pure and simple."

Now, this would have been a meditation wholly acceptable to God had I not also been subtly congratulating myself for being out there in the first place—it was very cold—and if in the back of my mind I was not also at the same time thinking that even "though numbers don't matter, it was too bad that more homeless people were not there. With more people it would feel like a successful ministry, and I would have something tangible to point to when I ask you to continue supporting him financially."

It was at that point that I jumped off the Podunk bus and ran straight into the Duke locker room. Off the cross and into downtown Corinth. And it was also at that point that four or five homeless people (who do not have as many places to go as important people do and therefore do not care quite as much what time things are supposed to start) actually showed up. In an act of exemplary hospitality, Jed invited me to read the scripture of the day. It was the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.

Friends, you have not heard that story until you have heard it outside with a very cold wind whipping everything around, and a small wooden cross repeatedly crashing to the frozen ground. In the company of people who live in a vast outdoor wilderness of

indifference and violence every night and day, I read the story of Jesus and his forty-day struggle with the demons, while six heads nodded knowingly. And when Mark mentions that Jesus was also with the wild beasts all that time, two of the men exchanged glances. Yes, they knew about that too.

And when we came to the part about the angels ministering to the exhausted, anguished Lord, one of them interrupted and said to Jed, “You are my angel.” Afterwards, Jed told me that earlier that morning, at the Outdoor Church in Porter Square, when he read the part about Jesus leaving the wilderness and preaching that “the time of salvation is now,” the people had interrupted and asked out loud, some with tears and loud voices, “Now? Now? What does that mean, *now*?”

Sisters and brothers, take time today to look at our cross that hangs so majestically here over our life together. It is the Big Upset, the foolishness of God, the hidden hope of every living thing. But we need eyes of faith to see this mystery. We need discerning hearts to embrace it. We need to reveal it to each other as we pray in the open spirit, as we read our stories and eat our meals at the open table, as we give and take the grace of Christ through the open door onto the open road and out into that hard and frozen world where underdogs hardly ever win.

Resolve today that our congregation will live in the form of the cross, so that by our love for each other, our hope in grace alone, and our humble service, the world might come to know in such foolishness the wisdom that will heal its wounds and set it free. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.