

The Life and Death of the Church
I Corinthians 1:18-25
John 2:13-22

“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.

What is the church to do with this once and never again life she has been given by God to live? If you were in church last Sunday, this the same song, second verse. When Jesus called together a crowd of potential followers with his disciples and said that those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it, I think he was speaking not only of individual lives lost and found but also of the church’s life and death.

Our Book of Order says as much at the end of a chapter on the church’s mission, a chapter written by my former colleague Wallace Alston for the new Book of Order adopted by the reuniting southern and northern Presbyterian Church over 100 years after the Civil War. Our operating manual says that the church is to demonstrate in its own life a new beginning for human life in the world as sin is forgiven, reconciliation accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are broken down. Presbyterians were attempting just that in reuniting. But the chapter goes on to say that the church is to participate in God’s activity in the world through her life for others: binding up wounds; ministering to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely, and the powerless; engaging in the struggle to free people from sin, fear, oppression, hunger and injustice; giving itself and its substance to the service of those who suffer; sharing with Christ in the establishing of his just, peaceable, and loving rule in the world. Finally, presciently, the chapter anticipates the church’s decades long struggle around the full inclusion of LGBTQ Presbyterians in the church’s membership, calling the church to a new openness in its own membership by affirming itself as a community of diversity, by becoming in fact as well as in faith a community of women and women of all ages, races and conditions, and by providing for inclusiveness as a visible sign of the new humanity. Hence the aspirational tag line on our mercifully spared sign that holds us to account: “An inclusive community of faith.” But here is the rub at the end of the chapter: the Church is called to do all of these things “*even at the risk of losing its life*, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life, sharing the gospel, and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond themselves to the new reality in Christ.” The life and death of the church.

Consider then, in the second place, at the beginning of John’s Gospel, Jesus’ judgment of the religion into which he was born. Acting in the “tradition of Israel’s prophets who cried out in protest against profaning of the temple, against debasing the worship of the Lord, against substituting ritual for devotion,” [Joseph Small] Jesus attacks Temple authorities for making his Father’s house a marketplace. No doubt the proceeds from the sale of animals for sacrifice in worship and the profits from exchanging Roman money for imageless coins were not being used to support the mission side of the budget! Two thousand years later, it seems to me Jesus’ outburst is another way of saying to institutional religion and saying to Christianity in particular that the things you are doing to save your life will result in your death. Be it praise bands and the prosperity gospel or missional theology and taking in renters to keep dying congregations on life support, we prolong the institution’s life rather than risking death and resurrection. “Destroy this temple,” Jesus said, “and in three days I will raise it up.” The life and death of the church.

Then consider, in the third place, Paul’s judgment of the religion organized in Jesus’ name. About the same time Mark was writing his Gospel, Paul was writing letters to an already conflicted church in Corinth. For eighteen months he had established and taught in house churches that came together as a “whole assembly” to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Now across the Aegean Sea in Ephesus, he hears that factions have developed among the Corinthians, with some members loyal to Paul, some to Apollos, some to Cephas and some to

Christ. It reminds me of church members swearing loyalty to the previous minister in opposition to the next minister God has sent to them, something I never want to hear about you! This was the worst news Paul could have gotten and he tells the Corinthians as much in the beginning of his letter. He even goes so far as to say that he is glad he had only baptized Crispus and Gaius so that no one could say they were baptized in his name, for he had come not to baptize but “to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.”

For Paul, the church existed in the world to get a particular word said. That word was the gospel. So in response to the stupidity of their competing loyalties, Paul acknowledges that the message the Corinthians alone have been given for the sake of the world—the message of the cross, of losing your life to find your life—is foolishness to those who believe human wisdom will save the day, to those who have only the grave ahead of them. But to the community that has died to its obsession with survival and success and power, a whole new life in Christ will be given, a life whose end is not the grave but the love that never dies. Tempted as the Corinthians might be by voices with more attractive messages to market and sure-fire techniques developed to help this new religion compete with the debaters of the age, the only word given them by God was the foolishness of the cross. The life and death of the church.

What, then, have these texts to do with the life and death of this church? Over the next few months, the newly formed Mission Study Committee will be asking you to reflect on this congregation’s life and mission, past, present and future. I do not know exactly what they will ask or how, but in anticipation I invite you to ask yourself, looking back, what needed to die over the last few decades so that this congregation might live the life given her by God to live now; and then ask yourself, looking ahead, what needs to die in the next few years so that this congregation might receive the future God is waiting to give her. The life and death of this church.

Second, imagine Jesus standing in the narthex or walking down this aisle. In the prophetic categories of profaning of the temple, debasing the worship of the Lord, and substituting ritual for devotion, ask yourself what of a Sunday morning might cause Jesus to crack the whip. The work of worship—known in most circles as liturgy—is the work of turning lives “deeply curved in on ourselves,” toward the God by whom and for whom we were made, and toward the neighbor, the stranger, the other whom we are commanded to love as ourselves. Today worship as marketable entertainment rather than the worship of God leading to an amendment of life is the way many churches are trying to save their lives. Jesus said, instead, die to death’s power over you and over your children in baptism and then live in the reckless abandon of those who trust God alone as the author and giver of life? Jesus said, “Take, eat” and then return to the world of privilege changed by the bread offered to all without condition and the cup poured out for many as a sign and a seal of the mercy we have neither earned nor deserve. So ask yourself: Is this hour of standing and sitting, silence and singing, speaking and listening merely ritual? Or is your worship of God, in any way, a foretaste of a whole new life? Are you simply going through the motions or by these means of grace has the bread broken, the cup shared, water sprinkled, word proclaimed, prayers dared, and praise sung turned this community anew toward the God who keeps turning toward us in Jesus Christ? The life and death of this church.

Finally as this congregation engages in self-examination, you might wonder what Paul would say if he were writing a letter to The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. Unless you have completely hoodwinked me, I do not think he would need to chastise you about factions and divisions. But I do think, in the sophisticated post-modern world of social media, his words about the foolishness of the church’s proclamation should still give you pause. Because who would get up on a Sunday morning to hear the church’s foolish message about denying yourself, about losing your life, about dying in order to live? Such a message will lead to the death of the church. Oh, yeah. Right. Got it. Thanks be to God!