2/1-2/20 Consider Your Call Rev. Amy Haines

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

If you could create your ultimate dream team, who would you choose? Would you dream team include the best athletes? Would your dream team include the brightest and best of the tech gurus? Would your dream team include coworkers who know the value of teamwork, hard work, and friendship? Would your dream team include those who have supported and mentored you through the years? It’s fun to dream about the perfect dream team.

Yet in reality, how many dream teams don’t ultimately succeed?

In professional football, Browns fans had their hopes up for a winning season this year, with such quality talent on the roster. Yet that talent did not gel into the season may had hoped for. In Olympic competition, the US has compiled the best professional men’s basketball players on a Dream Team since 1992. Yet in 2004, that Dream Team lost to Argentina in the semi-finals.

In reality TV, I used to watch the brightest and best compete on *The Apprentice.* Yet even these brilliant young leaders would fail if they let their egos get in the way of teamwork.

For years some in the church have joked that their perfect pastor would be a male in his 30s who has 20 years of experience and a young family with perfect children. And the staff surrounding this pastor would all be strong leaders of faith with no personal problems who could energize a congregation to do whatever they dreamed up to bring people into the church and into a relationship with Jesus.

How fun it is to dream.

Yet those dream teams are not reality.

Especially for God’s ways in this world.

God doesn’t call only the brightest and the best. God knows that there are no perfect pastors, no perfect families, and no perfect churches. Instead, God calls the reluctant and the willing.

God empowers the nobodies this world overlooks as well as the somebodies ready to be humble.

If we look closely at God’s ways in God’s word, God’s ways are never the ways of the world.

The world wants power and might. The world honors money and prestige. Yet God’s power is not the world’s power. God’s power is not in military might or human strength or intellectual ability. Instead, God’s power is shown in vulnerability and sacrifice and community.

God’s power is best shown through the message of the cross.

Look around you—how many crosses do you see just in this sanctuary? There is a cross on the top of the Christian flag, on the wall behind me, in the stained-glass window, even on the light fixtures.

Since I come to our church from the west every day, I see the United Methodist cross and flame on the end of our building as well as on our front sign.

Since I have children, invariably around our home we have crosses made of yarn and of paper, crosses made of wood and or metal, and even leftover palm crosses collected at the Good Friday Crosswalk.

Yet, with all of these different images of the cross, what does the cross mean to us?

Unfortunately, nowadays the cross is now seen more as a cool piece of jewelry than a statement of faith. I get disturbed when rappers wear large golden crosses then speak lyrics that are the exact opposite of who we are called to be as Christ followers. Whenever I wear any cross jewelry I become aware of how congruent or incongruent my words and actions are that day in relation to the message of the cross and who that cross represents.

Unfortunately, nowadays the cross is associated more with human hate and judgement than God’s love and grace.

Which is the original meaning of the cross.

In the Roman Empire of the first century, the cross represented death. It represented humiliation. It represented the mighty power of Rome to brutally suppress any and all who would come against the empire.

In the first century the cross was a vile image of hate and power. Imagine wearing a little electric chair around your neck. Imagine wearing a nuclear mushroom cloud around your neck.

Imagine wearing a hangman’s noose around your neck. If you shudder at imagining any of those symbols, then you have a glimpse of what the cross represented—the ultimate, lowest and most painful form of death possible in the Roman Empire.

And yet—and yet—it was on the cross, the vilest form of death, the symbol of ultimate power for the empire—it was on the cross that God displayed God’s power and wisdom, God’s compassion and salvation, for all people, for all eternity.

On the cross God reached out to us, with arms of love and with forgiving grace, and reminded us that nothing we do can earn our place in heaven, nothing we do can earn God’s love for us.

Instead, through the cross and the empty tomb, through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection here on earth, God showed us how much God cares for us, and offered us a path of salvation, a way to be forgiven for our sins, through faith in Christ Jesus.

The cross is a vile symbol of death, flipped by God into a loving symbol of new life.

In this letter to the church in Corinth, the apostle Paul is reminding those early believers that the message of the cross is what calls them together, and what holds them together. As we ponder this passage today, Paul reminds us that the message of the cross is still what calls us together, and what holds us together. For the message of the cross is not about our own wants and needs; rather the message of the cross is about the gifts of God’s love and forgiveness, God’s hope and grace, God’s presence and redemption.

We who believe in Jesus can look at the cross as a symbol of new life and forgiving grace.

Yet for many others in the culture around us, they look at the cross and see foolishness and folly.

Like the Jews looking for signs, many in our world today view good health or wealth as signs of God’s favor. They believe that if one is blessed materially or physically that is a sign of also being blessed by God. Yet I have met many who barely had two dollars to their name, or those who constantly battle health concerns, who have a deep faith in Jesus.

Like the Greeks, many still seek to prove or disprove the existence of Christ and explain the miracles of the Bible through reason and logic and scientific knowledge. Yet there are many scientists who do believe in God, for amid the wonder and mystery of the world around us they cannot deny our Creator God.

In our post-modern culture, many will acknowledge Jesus as a great moral teacher then reject Jesus as Savior, unable to fathom a God who suffers with us and for us.

There is nothing wrong with health and wealth and intelligence and teaching. Even the apostle Paul would admit that wisdom and miracles have their place. The danger lies in when these ways are used to prove or disprove God.

The cross is how we know God—a God who is not vengeful or absent, but a God who loves and cares deeply for us.

We experience such love and care and call when we believe in Jesus as God with us, who died on the cross to forgive our sins and rose from the dead to promise us new life. Our knowledge of Jesus is more than intellectual assent, however. Instead, our knowledge of Jesus is the knowledge of intimate relationship.

Through our relationship with Jesus we learn God’s ways, which appear foolish to the world around us: strength through suffering, power through surrender, new life through faith.

As Paul proclaims:

“Everything that we have—right thinking and right living, a clean slate and a fresh start—comes from God by way of Jesus Christ.” (30 MSG)

The good news that Paul reminds us today, is that this relationship with God through Jesus is offered to each and every one of us! God is not looking only for the brightest and best, the healthy and wealthy, the moral and ethical. God is looking for ordinary men and women to become disciples of God’s Son Jesus through believing the message of the cross.

We may look like a motley crew, but we are God’s dream team!

God calls those who struggle and those who have a history. God calls those who are poor and those who are forgotten. God calls those who have the wisdom and prestige of this world.

God calls the ordinary and the extraordinary.

Because God loves each and every one of us, God calls us all as God’s beloved and chosen ones!

As we reflected last week on the calling of Jesus’ first disciples, often our calls from God will come at unexpected times and in unexpected places, in the midst of the mundane and ordinary of our lives. And we don’t have to be called into set-apart ministry in order to be called by God.

.. Walter Earl Fluker puts it this way:

"God often calls us when we are running errands, doing the mundane, thankless chores of life.

When we least expect it, we are elected. Moses, hiding out on the back side of the Midian desert, was running an errand when a bush started burning that would not be consumed until he faced Pharaoh. Isaiah was somewhere in the temple, performing his regular priestly duties, when the heavens came down and the Holy commissioned him. Ezekiel, performing his pastoral tasks in the Exile, was transported by divine limousine service to a valley filled with dry bones.

Amos was out herding sheep and keeping sycamore trees when the voice came and compelled him to go and speak God’s word. Andrew and Peter were fishing out on the Sea of Galilee when the Master called them from fishing to fish for people.

"When Mary McLeod Bethune took up residence in Daytona, she had no idea that she would become the savior of a generation of young black girls and boys. Way down in the Mississippi Delta, Fannie Lou Hamer never dreamed that she would rise from picking cotton to picking presidents.

They were all just running errands, doing the mundane things, when God called.”

 --"Valley Calls," Pulpit 1.3 [Summer 1998], 36-37

 on “Your Call” 1-31-99 homileticsonline.com, heavily edited

Today, we are all called, in the midst of our mundane and ordinary lives. Today we are called to recognize God’s power in a symbol of death. Today we are called to believe in God’s forgiveness in Jesus’ time of suffering. Today we are called to proclaim that Jesus is good news for each and every one of us, no matter what the world might think or say. Today we are called to live as the church in the world.

Friends, when we take this call seriously, the world around us won’t like us. They will think we are being political when we call for compassion and justice for the unborn, for children in cages, for immigrants seeking a better life for their families, for those who will be forced to choose between food and diapers when their benefits are cut, and for returning citizens desiring a second chance. Yet God’s ways are not political—they are a call to care for all God’s children.

The world around us won’t like us when we value men, women and children from all nations and races, rather than treat some as second-class citizens or reject some simply because of location. God calls us to care for all God’s beloved children.

The world around us won’t like us when we live by God’s ways rather than the world’s ways, when we live for unity rather than division, when we live by hope rather than despair, when we speak up instead of cowering away from those in power.

Consider these shocking words from Jacques Ellul:

“Christians were never meant to be normal. We’ve always been holy troublemakers, we’ve always been creators of uncertainty, agents of dimension that’s incompatible with the status quo; we do not accept the world as it is, but we insist on the world becoming the way that God wants it to be. And the Kingdom of God is different from the patterns of this world.”

—Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Wipf and Stock, 2011).

-“God’s Protest Movement” 2-2-20 homileticsonline.com

Living by God’s kingdom ways won’t suddenly transform our world, but it will offer an alternative to the crazy ways of our world today. In reality, we’re not called to transform the world. That’s God’s job. Our job is to point to the God who can transform through our witness to what a difference Jesus has made in our lives.

Consider your call today, brothers and sisters in Christ, as God invites you to cherish the old rugged cross. Consider your call to believe and your call to proclaim and your call to be together the body of Christ.

If you have never considered God’s call to believe in Jesus, I invite you to begin a journey with Jesus. Accept him not only as the Son of God, accept him as your Savior and Lord. Find strength as you surrender to God’s ways in your life. Give thanks then that you have a story to share with others, a story of hope and love and grace. Begin the journey to a cross-shaped life that follows in the footsteps of Jesus.

If you have journeyed with Jesus for many years, renew your commitment to Christ today. Continue to share how the cross makes a difference in your daily life. Continue to value the importance of the body of Christ, the church, to encourage and support one another on our journeys of faith.

Then, as we come in a moment to share together the bread and cup of Holy Communion, may we all give thanks that death gives way to life, despair is overcome by hope, and God’s foolish ways transform our lives. Give thanks that God calls us to live and proclaim the good news of God’s love shown on a cross. Give thanks for the reminder once again today of who and whose we are.

In closing today, as you consider your call, reflect on these words from Casting Crowns, lyrics to their song “Nobody”:

Why You ever chose me
Has always been a mystery
All my life, I've been told I belong
At the end of a line
With all the other Not-Quites
With all the Never-Get-It-Rights
But it turns out they are the ones You were looking for
All this time

'Cause I'm just a nobody trying to tell everybody
All about Somebody who saved my soul
Ever since You rescued me, You gave my heart a song to sing
I'm living for the world to see nobody but Jesus

Moses had stage fright
And David brought a rock to a sword fight
You picked twelve outsiders nobody would've chosen
And You changed the world
Well, the moral of the story is
Everybody's got a purpose
So when I hear that devil start talking to me, saying
"Who do you think you are?" I say

I'm just a nobody trying to tell everybody
All about Somebody who saved my soul
Ever since You rescued me, You gave my heart a song to sing
I'm living for the world to see nobody but Jesus

-genius.com/Casting-crowns-nobody-lyrics

May the world around us not see the foolishness of the cross, but the wonder of God’s love through what we proclaim, in word and song and deed.

May it be so. Let us pray.