

Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany (A/RCL)
I Corinthians 1.18-31
January 30, 2005
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

Most of you **missed** the sermon I preached **last** weekend ☺, so I feel comfortable quoting from the same book I quoted then, *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd.

The novel involves a group of black women who have a special fondness for an old ship's figurehead they call "Our Lady of Chains." To them it represents Mary, the mother of Jesus. They tell a story how this statue washed up in just the right place to comfort their ancestors who were slaves. Our Lady of Chains encouraged their forebears to escape from slavery. They explained how "The bold ones fled, finding their way north, and those who didn't lived with a raised fist in their hearts" (p. 109).

Once a year on "Mary Day," August 15th, these women in the novel who are called the Daughters of Mary perform a ritual in which they wrap the statue in actual chains, to remember how the angry slaveholder used to whisk it away to remove her freeing influence. It never worked, though. The story these ladies tell about the statue is:

The master chained her in the barn fifty times, and fifty times she loosed the chains and went home. Finally he gave up and let her stay there. (p. 110)

The main character in *The Secret Life of Bees* is a fourteen-year-old white girl named Lily. She sleeps in the honey house where the Daughters of Mary place Our Lady of Chains overnight during this annual August ritual. Lily has a heavy heart and needs some **comfort**. All alone in the honey house, she looks at the statue swathed in chains and admits:

...[S]he didn't look like she could be of service to anybody, bound up with all that chain around her. You want the one you're praying to at least to **look** capable. (p. 258)

So – how capable does **He** look?? [Glancing toward crucifix on shelf in sanctuary....] He's the One **we** pray to. Can you see how that would seem strange to somebody coming to all of this **cold**, somebody without our faith? Why would we consider Someone to be all-powerful who can't even move His arms and feet because they're nailed down?? What could we reasonably expect **Him** to **do** for us??

That was the attitude of a lot of people in the mid-first century when St. Paul wrote his letters to the folks in Corinth, including the First Letter to the Corinthians, today's second lesson. St. Paul says:

The message about the cross is **foolishness** to those who are perishing.... (I Cor.1.18)

For St. Paul, "those who are perishing" are those who don't believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who **died** so that we may live, who was **raised up** by the **power** of God the Father, and who is still **present** through their Holy Spirit. To these people, the cross is **stupidity**.

Most of the Jews of that time considered Jesus' death on a cross an absolute **scandal**, because of Deuteronomy 21.22-23 which says:

When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for **anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse**.

To them, that referred to anybody who was crucified. In their opinion, not only was Jesus **not** divine, He was **cursed by God**. Understandably, in their minds that took Him out of the running to be their Messiah.

A supposed savior **dying** on a cross didn't make sense to the Greeks either. They were pagans who worshiped power-**full**, not power-**less** gods. Their gods were **in control**. Their gods called the shots. Their gods were **cool**. They were **not** convicted enemies of the state and they did **not** die **at all**, no less die shameful deaths. How could someone who **died** protect anybody else from death??

The message about the cross is **foolishness** to those who are perishing.... (I Cor.1.18)

...[B]ut **we proclaim** Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (I Cor. 1.23-25)

God's actions don't follow **human** logic; God's actions are driven by **divine** wisdom and **loving mercy**. Jesus didn't end up on the cross because He was **powerless**; He hanged there because He was **obedient** to the will of His Father in heaven, who sent the Son not to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him.... Why the Son had to die is a great mystery we cannot begin to understand.

But what we **do** know is that:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor.5.21)

What we **do** know is that our Lord Jesus took upon Himself the punishment **we** should have borne for the sins **we** have committed.

...[H]e was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed. (Isaiah 53.5)

That is the mystery and that is the wonder. The cross, an ancient instrument of torture on which our Lord died, became the tree of life for us.

Seen from our painfully limited **human** point of view, God's actions often make no logical sense. For instance, why did God call such a ragtag bunch of people to be the believing community in Corinth?

...[N]ot many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God **chose** what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God **chose** what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (I Cor. 1.26-29)

Sometimes we look at our own lives and think, "**What** is God doing here?" "Where do I **go** from here?" "How can anything **good** come out of this painful circumstance?" And then we are blessedly reminded that God's ways are **not** our ways, that God does not judge as humans do, that heavenly sense looks a lot different than earthly logic, that "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

The Daughters of Mary in *The Secret Life of Bees* call their statue "Our Lady **of** Chains," not "Our Lady **in** Chains":

'They called her that not because she *wore* chains...'
'They called her Our Lady of Chains because she *broke* them.'
(p. 110)

Our Crucified Lord is the One who understands our suffering and has taken it upon Himself. He was once exalted on the cross, and He is now exalted in heaven. The One who looks power-less is actually power-full. For us He is:

"Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (I Cor. 1.24),
God's answer to our sin and our suffering, Jesus, our loving Savior and risen Lord, who **is**, despite all appearances, the **very** capable One to whom we pray. Amen

