

There's a story told by Eugene Carson Blake, once a stated clerk for the Presbyterian Church, that tells a little about how culture is changing. Dr. and Mrs. Blake were in London at the opening of the Olympic games. On a lark, they went to Wembley Stadium where they waited with 100,000 other spectators for the arrival of the British Runner who would complete the final leg of the torch relay. The crowd was dutifully appreciative of the arrival of the King and Queen, and cheered exuberantly for the athletes from fifty nations as they made their way through the stadium- you remember the scene when it was Atlanta -it always looks much the same: hopeful athletes at the top of their games, each wanting to carry home Olympic gold. But, in an odd move, the director of the festivities selected a surprising piece of music to include with all of the secular fare - much to the surprise of Dr. and Mrs. Blake, the choir and orchestra launched into the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's *Messiah*. In a reflex action, the Blakes stood. They and a handful of others. The crowd was familiar with the protocol to stand for the performance of *God Save the King*, and was even respectful of *The Star Spangled Banner* and *La Marseillaise*, when the choir reached the lines "King of Kings, and Lord of Lords", Dr. and Mrs. Blake heard howls of protest of the crowd directed at those who were standing "Sit Down! We can't see! Sit Down!"

My how the world has changed since 1948.

About the experience he wrote, "This is not because there was in that crowd an particular animosity toward Jesus Christ. The experience in Wembley Stadium merely underlined the fact that most people in our Western World do not take the Christian Church as seriously as we in church circles do. And sometimes I wonder if we who are professing

Christians have not been so much infected by the secularism of our times that even in the church a good many of us take for granted the worldly standards of value that theoretically we repudiate.”

Isn't that an interesting approach even 50 years ago? Rather than criticizing the secular culture he asked the church whether we are “so much infected by the secularism of our times that even in the church we take for granted the worldly standards of value”? It has been a long time since Dr. Blake wrote, and I don't think it has gotten easier to be a Christian. We have to live in this world, don't we, and it has very distinct metrics of value! If we are exempt from worldly expectations, I'd like to know about it, because as it stands right now, I'm pretty sure that I have to do all the same things that my secular neighbors have to do. It's a simple system we live in, after all. By any metric of value, if you don't have money, you don't get stuff. That's the way the world works. And we live in it.

That's the way the world worked in ancient Corinth and ancient Israel as well. There are very few things that you can count on in every age, but the spirit of commerce may just be one of them. If you climb up the walls of the ruins of the Corinth, the ancient fortified city, you can look off one side and see the Aegean Sea, and you can look off the other side and see the Adriatic. So Corinth was positioned in just the right place to be a dual port town. Which is to say that in the ancient economy, Corinth was positioned in such a way as to be a very prosperous place. Life was good in Corinth- the money was flowing, bacchanalia was the order of the day- they even had their own games, the Isthmian Games, every two years- they ranked right up there with the Olympics, and if you think modern Americans are sports crazed, in Corinth, the sponsor of the games was the

highest political office. Corinth was the place for wine, women and song. Or, at least it was about two hundred years before Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthian Church. By Paul's day, though, things had calmed down considerably. Rome had conquered Corinth, and Rome made Corinth clean up. Gone were the thousand priestesses of the temple of Aphrodite – Corinth, like Times Square, went respectable.

The spirit of commerce may have been well, but Roman occupation was never known for increasing morale, so if you asked any Corinthian on the street, they would probably let you know that you have to look out for yourself. Income inequality was a real problem in Corinth - Corinth was the place where Paul had to chastise believers for not sharing their food at communion. In the early church it was just a big meal, and in Corinth everybody brought their own food. The rich ate their food, and the poor ate their food if they had it. Sometimes they didn't, and the rich got in trouble with Paul for not sharing. They'd missed the point of the whole act. So Paul set them straight.

The Corinthians may have been planted as a church by Paul himself, but they were not without their issues. They were a divisive, even rancorous group from time to time. At times, it seemed like they searched for controversy.

Culturally, perhaps it was jealousy of Athens and all their thinkers being so close and all, but the Corinthians had elevated smooth polished speech to the point of idolatry.

I suppose I can understand a little envy with your nearest neighbor produced democracy, Socrates and Plato and you're known for your defunct brothels, but then the fascination with speaking crept into the church. Some of them liked Peter- I mean really, who wouldn't like Peter? Jesus himself said that Peter was the rock on which he would build his church. But then, Peter had never actually been there, and Paul had, so some folks

like Paul. I can understand that. Paul is likeable in a curmudgeonly sarcastic straightforward sort of way. Of course, there's also that smooth talking slick young Jewish preacher named Apollos- the man was smart and he could preach, and he was reputed not to be too hard on the eyes. So they split themselves and their loyalties and one person was saying, "I'm with Apollos all the way," and others replied, "No, no, you've got to go with Peter," and then of course, still others would say "well, you know, Paul was our founding pastor..."

They lost the Gospel in the fray. So Paul fired off this letter to remind them how they are to measure themselves differently.

"For the message of the Cross is foolishness those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written (and here he quotes Isaiah) I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." He goes on "Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the gentiles, but to them who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

Paul lays it out there- relying on scripture he blasts the Corinthians for empty God-talk and meaningless gestures. He drags Isaiah into the argument - the Jews in the crowd would have caught that- and reminded the Corinthians that what the Israelites got for relying on their own intelligence and politics and scheming was nothing short of the Babylonian captivity, a generation of slavery in a foreign land. And then he went on to say that the cross, that symbol that dominates our sanctuary, that defines our faith, is a stumbling block to Jews- well frankly, it would have been, and Paul would have known- he was a Pharisee, as educated as you could get, and he knew you don't have a crucified

Messiah! It's contrary to the very definition of Messiah. Messiah translates literally from the Hebrew as "the smeared on one." Elegant, no? It's the sign that God gave that an individual would be raised up as a king. David got smeared on, Saul got smeared on, all the great ones were anointed in this way and they all went on to victory- and when they did not, when they died because of their activities as Saul did, it was a sign that God's favor had passed. You don't have a crucified messiah. A stumbling block for Jews. But Paul wasn't done yet- he still had the gentiles to get to- a crucified messiah? Foolishness! In the Greek pantheon of gods, there isn't one who gets nailed to a tree! And just to hammer it home, Paul goes on to point out that by worldly metrics not many of them were wise, not many were of noble birth, not many were particularly powerful- sort of the opposite of flattery - but that God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are *not*, to reduce to nothing things that *are*. It is a fascinating reordering of importance.

So what about the world we live in? Is it a fair indictment of us church folks that we are so seduced by the secularism of the world that we scarcely recognize the distinction between a worldly point of view and a Godly one? Have we got what it takes to measure up to Paul's definition of Christianity?

I have to tell you that when Paul laid out what the expectations of a person of faith are, he would have had hovering over his shoulder the whole body of the law – the Decalogue we read today that God gave Israel to define themselves as God's people. He would have had the whole witness of the prophets, all of the justice and righteousness talk of Amos, and Micah and Hosea, rolling down like waters, like an ever-flowing stream from his

pen. Paul would have been pointing to a God whose metric of success is righteousness.

Do we have what it takes to measure up?

It becomes more and more clear as we explore what Jesus calls us to in righteousness- in living as a community of faith, that we are in fact called to live not for ourselves, but for each other and for *the* other. I had a seminary professor that liked saying that Christianity is not a club for insecure people - being a Christian is not an easy task. Living for the other means more than living for the other in our own insular existence. It means reaching beyond the sanctuary walls. So is the indictment fair? Are we church folks living for the other or do Paul's words serve as a thorn in our side?

As much as I'd love to be self-congratulatory, and we certainly have a lot to be proud of, I'd still have to say that the answer is *both*.

I got two letters from *Our House* this past year. Our House provides a safe place for children whose families are experiencing homelessness. One was thanking us for a donation of \$40 that our children sent at the end of January – we should be so proud of them - and the other was just for a thousand dollars that we gave from our mission giving and it all reminded me of a wonderful event I was at this fall that was organized and supported by Morningside members where they raised \$25,000 in twelve minutes.

You did that.

I had the wonderful experience this past week of taking lunch with Lysley Tyler down to our Habitat build site – and I learned in the process that Morningside has built 13 houses... 13 families enjoy decent, affordable housing because of you.

You did that.

You heard over the past weeks about three missions that Morningside supports.

And on March 15th, we're sending 14 workers to rebuild in the tornado ravaged parts of Alabama. Pray for them. But even more importantly, fill in where they are leaving gaps: sign up for habitat. Show up to plant trees here at Morningside that morning. If you want to sign up for habitat, call Lysley. Her number is 404-724-0606.

Whenever we get to the season of Lent, the question I get the most is about giving something up. That's fasting. Fasting is not particularly part of our Protestant tradition, and it has diminished significantly in Catholicism since the second Vatican Council.

A few weeks ago, Lloyd suggested instead of fasting that Lent be an opportunity to try something new in our faith life. Lent has a definite beginning, a definite end time, and it is tailor made to try out new things. I'd like to commend to you the reminder that Lent isn't over yet. It's not too late to try out something new.

I'm not telling you this because we need more volunteers, though we do, and it's not because this church isn't doing things- clearly we are - and I want to add that you are not a good or bad Christian if you do or don't - God doesn't love you any more or less whether or not you give up chocolate for lent or get up at six in the morning to go build houses.

Do it because God is calling you to do it. Choose different standards of value, even when it doesn't make sense.

In the town where I lived when I was in seminary there was a grocery store called Davidson's. They were locally owned- or at least they were at one point. There was a woman in the town- which was a very wealthy town, incidentally- who was, to say the least, off balance. I am unsure what exactly her mental illness was, but it inhibited her from being able to function at a level that would permit her to support herself. So, every

day like clockwork, she went into Davidson's grocery store and shoplifted her lunch. Never anything exorbitant- just an apple or two, or maybe some crackers. Anyone who lives in Atlanta knows that right next to great wealth, one can quickly find poverty and homelessness and hunger. Well, eventually, economic pressures being what they were, Davidson's had to move down the street to another location further out from the main square where property values were cheaper. When they moved, the pastor of the Presbyterian church that was on the square got a phone call from the manager. "I was wondering if you could do me a favor. I'd do it myself, but I'm worried about embarrassing someone. There's a mentally ill woman who comes here regularly, and we were worried she might not know where we had moved- I was wondering, could you please tell her where we are? We'd hate for her to miss lunch."

The message of the Cross is foolishness to them that are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.