

## **Undivided Allegiance**

Last week we explored the idea that we are like “Arrows in God’s Quiver.” We noted that an arrow is an object designed to be put to use, sent forth with a direction and a purpose from the sender’s hand. Thinking about ourselves as arrows, a phrase we borrowed from Isaiah, raises important questions like: “What mission or purpose should we be aimed at fulfilling?” And this can lead to differences of opinion and sometimes conflict.

One way of answering the question for ourselves might be to go home and stand in front of the mirror, putting a hand over our hearts and saying “I pledge allegiance to...” and then pausing, to make sure that the answer we give is truly what we are about and not just a reflex. And if we can do this, it will provide us with the kind of answer we need to organize and puts our days in a straight line, so that every footstep has purpose, leads us in the direction of the goal our hearts are seeking. It will determine where we go and who we see and what we do.

We might say to ourselves, “I pledge allegiance to making sure I take care of my own wants and needs first.” Or we might say, “I pledge

allegiance to giving my family or my friends the best support I can give them.” Or we might say, “I pledge allegiance to addressing climate change or to perpetuating what I believe is essential to the American way of life.”

My guess is that several answers may come to mind before we settle on one that is uppermost. And the answer we settle on, it seems to me, is the message we are sending to the world. It is the recipe we dip our arrowheads in, a recipe designed for blessing and life or “god forbid” tipped with poison.

### **Division in the Early Church**

The question of where their allegiances lay, was already a source of division and potential conflict in the earliest churches, as we heard in Paul’s letter to the congregation in Corinth, where he tells them:

Each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided?

Corinth in Paul’s day was a port city populated by people from all across the Roman Empire and with a wide range of income levels. And this diversity was reflected in the congregation. It was a congregation of

people gathered in out of a world full of competing influences. And in that sense their experience would have been much like ours.

When I came here from Heath, I came from being the minister of a small New England Church, with Congregational origins, in a small rural town tucked away in the hills. You would think that the Heath Church would be very homogenous and that the congregation would be very unified in its beliefs.

But that is not how it is. Even in the seemingly most sequestered places in our society, where people are related to each other in every which way, there is a great deal of hidden diversity. People with many varied and diverse experiences sit side by side in the pews. One of my best friends there was a man who spent his childhood in India. The minister there now, spent his career in Haiti. And while I was there, the man who lived across the street brought home a wife from the Philippines. She had never been out of her own country.

And so, even in Heath the arrows in the church quiver don't all point in the same direction, at least that is true when it comes to non-essentials. And I think that is a good thing. God endowed the world with a richness of diversity, that is a marvel and joy to behold. And it

must be that we were created to delight in that variety, without being pulled apart by it.

### **Characteristics of the Chosen One**

Part of what I think Paul saw playing out in Corinth was the extent to which we human beings are indeed constructed like arrows. We are not able to thrive when we are inwardly divided and feel ourselves being pulled in two directions at the same time. The result is that we miss hitting any target altogether. We are not able to be “spiritual multi-taskers.”

Scientific studies have shown that the human beings are essentially incapable of doing more than one thing successfully at a time; that the idea of successful multi-tasking is a myth. As Jesus said, and Abraham Lincoln repeated for us: “A house divided falls.” So, I would submit that in this sense we really are designed like arrows and whatever we are committed to must be become one overall driving purpose.

And so we need to be able to pledge our allegiance to someone who we feel is reliable and trustworthy, who can present us with one clear target for our lives; with a vision that makes sense of and that brings all

the important parts of our lives together into one unified and lifegiving purpose and direction.

And I say someone, because what we ultimately pledge allegiance to has to be alive and warm and personal. Our Savior cannot simply be a set of lifeless ideas, like some robot, because we are not robots. Our Savior can only be one who lives and feels and can communicate those feelings to us; someone with whom our hearts can identify and be in living relationship.

The “Paul’s, the Apollos’ and Cephas’s” of this world *do* meet this criteria of being flesh and blood, and of being living and breathing and full with emotions. However, none of them can be our Savior. This is because they are all finite human beings, limited by their own experiences and all participate in the fallenness of Adam. And as fallen creatures, none can be for us the absolutely reliable foundation, the ultimate source of truth and meaning, upon which we can base our lives.

Paul understood this and so he begged the Corinthians to stop creating new primary allegiances around the various strong personalities in the congregation and in Corinthian society. He wanted them to stop saying

that they “*belonged*” to this or that group in order to restore their allegiances to the one the congregation was originally created to serve, above all to Jesus.

Paul wanted them to belong to the only one who shares fully, not only in our human experiences of living in this world, but shares fully in the life of God. Jesus Christ, fully human and fully divine. While all others can only catch glimpses through the veil that separates us from the fullness of God, Christ sits at God’s right hand. So, when Paul calls the Corinthians to Jesus, he is reminding us also, that for our church, there can be no earthly substitute for his final authority. Christ alone is our guide to God’s true intentions and our salvation.

### **Christ and His Cross**

But what does it mean to be unified in Christ? Surely it means that we must share a particular understanding of life. He is not a blank page upon which we can write whatever is convenient and then attribute it to him, as many do. No. The message of Christ is very specific and Paul points us directly to the central message of his life, the “way of the cross” expressed both in his word and deed.

The cross that he carried through his life and upon which he gave his life, symbolizes for us the burden he bore of caring for a suffering humanity and providing healing to all who came to him. And he carried that burden even though it led to his death. And God vindicated him by raising him from death to eternal life. By giving up his life on the cross, he showed us the way to “eternal life”.

### **“Foolishness”**

This is the way of life our faith challenges us to follow. This story is the solution in which we are to dip the tips of our arrows. And Paul goes on to describe the “way of the cross” in an interesting way. He calls it “foolishness to those who are perishing, but the power of God, to those who are being saved”. And so, I would like to focus the rest of the sermon on the fact that this is how Paul chose to describe Christian life.

When we look back on the Gospel story from our own point of view, it may not seem to us like a foolish story. But if we consider what it may have been like for people who lived through those events in real time, following Jesus could easily have been seen as a very foolish undertaking, definitely an act of faith! How foolish Peter and Andrew must have seemed, for giving up their homes, their fishing boats and all

the security they had to follow a backcountry preacher who showed up and promised that he would make them “fishers of people.”

How foolish it must have seemed to those who were watching, when a rag tag crowd cheered on this country preacher, as he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Imagine believing that this man who refused to resort to the use of force in any way, might be able to change the world with a power equal to that of the mighty emperors who rode into vanquished cities on warhorses ahead of legions of battle hardened troops.

What foolishness the message of the cross must have seemed: How could it be that by denying oneself and taking up the burden of caring for other people’s needs, a person might be saved. How foolish to look upon the cross and see a dying man, who willingly allowed himself to be pinned to it, and then see in him the gateway to our own salvation.

From the perspective of those who lived through those events, there must have been many times when they wondered to themselves whether they were in fact engaged in something worth doing or in some foolish pipe dream. How could they have known back then that this visionary preacher, who so captivated them would become the



central figure in Western Civilisation - to the extent that even the years of our calendar are calculated in tribute to his birth? How could a handful of fishermen know that when Jesus named them “fishers of men,” that the catch would come to number in the hundreds of millions.

It can't have been a coincidence that all of this came to pass. It couldn't have been just some fluke or scam. A scam could never have had the concentration of energy for good to let fly so many Saints upon the world over so many centuries. It had to have been the power of God that was alive in this man and in his message. There had to have been something so wonderful and compelling about him, for so many people to have willingly accepted the label of fool in exchange for his offer of salvation.

### **Are We Fools?**

I believe that many people today see our world as a runaway train that no one can stop. They see a world in which powerful people take what they can with little respect for others. They say to themselves, “Everyone is in it for themselves. And I am only one person. How am I or a small group of us going to change anything?”

They say to themselves: “Yes, I am like an arrow. I can’t do everything. And, like everyone else, I too will dip my arrows in “self-preservation”. It is a dog eat dog world out there and so “I pledge allegiance to my own self preservation.” Dipping my arrow in Christ’s self-giving love for others would be a foolishness I cannot afford.”

In many churches today, we must seem to others to be like that handful of country fishermen who were willing to go all in on what seemed to many a fool’s errand. When we were growing up, being part of a church seemed anything but foolish. It was the establishment. We didn’t choose to be a part of it. We were born into it. But today, we are in a situation that is more like that of those first Christians. We are fewer and the purpose of our Master is at odds with today’s rulers every bit as much as it was in their time and we can choose whether or not we want to be a part of it

Our purpose as Christians is not “self-preservation first” but first and foremost it is to dip our arrowheads into the story of the self-giving love of Christ and to live accordingly”. And I’m sure that this makes us look just as foolish to onlookers today, as those fishermen must have looked to those around them.

It reminds me of a saying from Margaret Mead, one of the great anthropologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who said:

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.”

And so my prayer today is this: Let’s keep the faith. If there are moments when what it does seem like a fools errand, let’s remember that the appearance of being a fool is one of the original marks by which Jesus’s followers were identified. “The message about the cross has always been foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God!”