**Grace Presbyterian Church**

1 Cor. 1:18-31

October 3, 2021

Rev. Stacy Rector

Though I am not there with you in person, I am sure that if I were, I would see a cross somewhere in your sanctuary, maybe even multiple crosses. It is a given really to have a cross visible somewhere in any Christian church. And, with churches on nearly every street corner in some places, particularly in the South, there must be thousands of crosses displayed in sanctuaries all across this country, never mind those perched upon church steeples, carved into headstones, even dotting interstate highways. Crosses are such common sights that we rarely give them a second glance most days.

And of course, the cross’ ubiquity makes sense. It is a central symbol of our faith, representing God’s self-giving love poured out for the world in the crucifixion of Jesus. And, because of its profundity and what it means to us, the cross has become, in some ways, not only common a sight, but beautiful. Decorative even. We wear it on jewelry and on t-shirts. In our churches and sometimes our homes, we may see it in gilded in gold or silver or glowing in stained glass. We drape it with cloth, depending on the season, and sometimes bedazzle it with flowers at Easter because it is so special to us.

If you stop and think about it though, it’s a bit odd to see a cross as a thing of beauty. I wonder if on a subconscious level, with all our decorative applications and inclinations, we make it pretty so it is easier to take, like chasing down bitter medicine with big gulp of sweet tea. For when we pretty it up, we minimize its scandal. It is a cross after all. And like the noose, or the electric chair, or the needle, it is the method by which Jesus and the others, condemned with him, were executed as criminals by Roman authorities.

So, this symbol of our faith, the cross, is a symbol execution, of condemnation, of utter defeat by the world’s standards. And from a PR perspective alone, it would be foolishness to build a faith based upon it.

At least this what Paul seems to be saying in the text today. Earlier in his letter to the Corinthian church, Paul shares his concerns that there are factions developing within the congregation, quarrelling with each other, and Paul reminds the community that whatever claims each faction boasts, whichever church leader to whom they pledge allegiance, regardless of the wisdom, eloquence, authority, or standing of those who lead or espouse any particular position, it all amounts to foolishness in light of the cross.

As the translation in The Message puts it, “Take a good look friends, at who you were when you got called to this life. I don’t see many of the “brightest and best” among you, not many influential, not many from high society families. Isn’t it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks, exploits, and abuses, chose the “nobodies” to expose the hollow pretensions of the “somebodies.” And only nobodies end up on crosses…or so says the wisdom of the world.

The challenge then as now is not only to contemplate the profound act of love demonstrated on the cross but also to contemplate the particularity of such a death. The cross reveals Jesus to us as both a victim of brutal violence and at the same time, a criminal condemned by the state. He is not one or the other but he is both. And through this particular death at the hands of the powers that be, God has exposed those powers as illegitimate and impotent as the stone is rolled away. This paradoxical truth has all sorts of implications for us who follow an executed man, certainly implications on our approach to the death penalty.

So what are the implications? Some questions that at least point us toward them are questions like, “What does it mean to follow Jesus in a world of violence? How do we protect the people we love from those who would do them harm? When Jesus says, “love your enemies,” about whom is he speaking? What about the surviving family members of murder victims and their needs? does forgiveness look like in the context of a murder? Do we believe in God’s power to redeem even the “worst of the worst?” As recipients of God’s infinite mercy, how are our lives informed by mercy?

I am sure that there are other questions to be asked as well. Regardless of how many questions there are, all of them are complex. Now, if you here today hoping that I am going to provide you with all the answers, get comfortable, as you are in for a long wait.

But, if you are here to ponder these questions with me, then you are in the right place, for if I have learned anything in my ministry around this issue, it is that I am a fellow struggler, with my own views constantly shaped by the experiences, the stories, of those who have been directly impacted by the death penalty.

What I want to do this morning, in light of our text, is to share just a few of the stories of those I have had the privilege to know and who continue to inform my understanding not only of the death penalty, but of what it means to follow Jesus, a crucified Savior.

These are too often stories of young people raised in poverty, with little education, few resources, some who endure traumatic abuse, perhaps struggling with mental illness or an addiction, who find themselves charged with a horrific crime, appointed an overworked, under-resourced attorney, and sentenced to die often waiting for 20 years or more for the sentence to be carried out, if ever.

Stories of correctional officers, who, in the dark of night, are asked to strap a man or woman down—people they may have known for decades—and kill that person on our behalf, left to struggle with the mental and emotional toll resulting in what we have asked them to do.

Stories of murder victims, whose lives are brutally and senselessly taken, cutting short lifetimes of possibility, and leaving parents, families, friends, and communities to deal with the overwhelming grief, anger, and hole in their hearts that can never be filled.

It is the story of Bud Welch, who only daughter, Julie, was killed in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. Three years after the bombing, as Bud struggled with anger, depression, and a longing for revenge, he was watching the news and saw the face of a man that appeared as broken as his own. That man was Bill McVeigh, the father of bomber Timothy McVeigh. Bud decided he needed to meet Bill. Through his Catholic church, he managed to set up a meeting with the Bill and traveled to the McVeigh home in upstate NY. Bud and Bill sat down at the kitchen table awkwardly, not knowing what to say to one another. Bud looked up on the wall and saw photos of Bill’s kids hanging there, including Timothy, the man who killed his own child. Before he knew it, Bud said, “that is a good-looking son you have there.” And the tears began to flow. The two fathers wept together, grieving for their children. Bud says that his encounter with Bill McVeigh changed him. His anger began to lift, and he realized that their families were now in this together. This realization was a critical part of his healing process, not Timothy’s execution, which from that day forward, Bud worked to stop. That’s foolishness, human wisdom says Paul reminds us though, that to those of us who are being saved, and not “one and done” saved but on the journey of salvation happening each and every day, for those who are being saved, it is the power of God.

There are also the stories of individuals on death rows all across this country, who challenge our stereotypes about who these convicted killers are and remind us that there is more to all of us than our worst act. A multiple murderer from Tennessee, Nick Sutton, whose encounter with Christ’s love in prison changed him. Nick, who had been a life taker, murdering a number of people, including his own grandmother, the uncle of one of our TADP board members, and another inmate…Nick Sutton, the worst of the worst even, became a life saver.

On three separate occasions, Nick Sutton risked his own life to save the lives of corrections staff, including fending off armed inmates who wanted to brutalize a correctional officer during a prison riot, men who could have easily taken Nick’s life as he protected the officer as they tried to drag him further into the chaos inside. Nick also became a caretaker for a fellow inmate, Paul House, when Paul, who would later be exonerated of the crime that landed him on death row, could no longer walk as his untreated multiple sclerosis worsened. Nick would literally pick Paul up and carry him when Paul needed to shower or to get to the visiting room to see his mother. Nick became one of the most trusted men on death row, trusted by both the incarcerated and the staff. Trusting Nick Sutton…. “foolishness,” says the world, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God.

Nick Sutton was executed in February of last year, just a couple of weeks before COVID shut executions down in Tennessee.

Then there are the stories of 186 human beings to date who have been exonerated and released from death row across this nation since 1973, when evidence of their wrongful convictions came to light. Some of whom spent decades in a 6 x 9 foot cell, and some even sitting on death watch just hours before scheduled executions, while their attorneys struggled to get some court, any court, to consider the evidence that could set them free.

These individuals are not alive today because of the system but in spite of it.

These are the stories of men and women, who before their exonerations, stood where Pervis Payne, a man on Tennessee’s death row, and his family stand now.

The case of Pervis Payne is a case with a number of factors that make it ripe for a wrongful conviction and death sentence---a Black man with intellectual disability accused of murdering a white woman in a county with a long history of racial violence where prosecutors played to racist themes and withheld exculpatory evidence. Sadly, his story is not unusual but fits a broader pattern of a system in disarray. Mr. Payne was set for execution on Dec. 3, 2020, but his execution was stayed because of COVID. A new date could be set at any time.

Beyond his intellectual disability, which constitutionally should disqualify from execution, the District Attorney refused to conduct DNA testing on crime scene evidence until a judge ordered the testing last year. Now the DA’s office says that a key piece of the evidence supposed to be in their custody is missing, fingernail scrapings, that if tested, could validate Mr. Payne's unwavering claim of innocence.

Before he and his families’ nightmare began, Pervis Payne and his sisters were raised in a small community in West Tennessee, with their father serving as a Church of God in Christ pastor, a role he continues to serve in today. Their home was a loving one, steeped in faith, and in kindness. Pervis’ parents did whatever they could to encourage and protect him as he grew up, particularly given his disability. They taught him to be kind and to help those who needed it. And like other African American parents, they taught Pervis and his sisters, that because they were Black, they had to be particularly cautious when engaging the police and other authorities.

But in June of 1987, their worst fears were realized. Pervis or Bubba as his sister, Rolanda, has never changed his explanation of what happened that day. He went to see his girlfriend at her apartment. She wasn’t home. He heard crying coming from the apartment across the hall. He remembered what his mother told him about helping people who needed it. He knocked on the door and walked in. The scene before him was horrific: a young mother, staring at him, with a knife in her neck and two very small children stabbed and bleeding on the floor.

For any of us, this scene would be disorienting. For Pervis, who lives with intellectual disability, it was nearly incapacitating. He bent down and pulled the knife out of the woman’s neck. He began to panic and when he heard the police sirens, he knew that he would be blamed. He ran. The police found him and though he tried to explain, though his mother and father begged the police to listen, begged them to give him a drug test to prove he wasn’t using drugs, the Payne’s were ignored.

Pervis was charged with the murders of Charisse Christopher and her daughter Lacie. Her son, Nicholas, survived. Pervis was tried quickly, in only six months, unheard of in capital cases, and with no real motive for the crime, the prosecutor relied on racial stereotypes to portray Pervis as hypersexual drug-addled Black man preying on a white woman, even referring to his “dark hands were on her white skin.” Pervis was convicted and sentenced to die.

For decades, his family tried to get someone to listen to them. Rolanda recalls every year at Christmas, her mother would tell the family, “This year Pervis will be home for Christmas. This will be the year.” Mrs. Payne died in 2005, waiting for Pervis to come home.

When asked about whether or not she still has hope after 34 years, Rolanda says, “I do. People are finally listening. I have more hope now than ever before.” 34 years and she still hopes…. Foolishness, the world says but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God.

Friends, God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. This is what the cross of Christ shows us over and over again. And on that cross, God’s embrace is wider than all that divides us and God’s grace is enough to face the pain of the world with love and compassion and mercy. So let us, no matter where we are on the journey, strive to be faithful to the one who calls us to take up our cross and follow. Foolishness, the world may say, but we say, no…not foolishness, it is the power of God.