

Barbara Brown Taylor

# *Preaching Christ Crucified*

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

“Hello. It is so lovely to see you all here this evening. My message tonight will be brief and to the point. God is not in the business of protecting us from harm, and no amount of good behavior will keep us safe. For evidence of this, see the cross. Instead, God is in the business of restoring us to life, which may involve some painful procedures. If we are willing to go through it and the operation is successful, our lives will not belong to us anymore.

We will be God’s gifts to the world, and our ‘to do’ lists will have no end. If the operation is really successful, our good works will get us killed.

P.S. Every day will be full of fresh astonishment and we will never, ever get bored.”

When you get through preaching, the only name on anyone's lips should be the name of Jesus Christ." That was the standard Paul held himself to. "When I came to you," he wrote the church at Corinth, "I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." He came to them in weakness and much trembling, he said. He would not dazzle them even if he could, so that their faith would rest not on his wisdom but on the power of God.

We do not know for sure what all of Paul's limitations were, but he and everyone else knew he had them. In the first place, there was that mysterious thorn in the flesh that gave him so much trouble, and in the second place, he was not all that great a preacher. He knew what some people said about him—that he was strong on paper but weak in person, with contemptible speech (2 Corinthians 10:10). According to a second-century source, The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla, he was "a man of small stature, with bald head and crooked legs...with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked."

But not all of his limits were given. This is the same Paul who founded at least seven churches and wrote thirteen eloquent letters that are quoted to this day. The book of Acts contains several of his speeches—which are anything but contemptible—along with the names of those who were converted by hearing him.

At least some of his limits, then, were chosen. Paul could impress a crowd as well as anyone could, but on the whole he held back, because as far as he was concerned, any preacher who won a following by wooing them with grand ideas and thrilling language was guilty of fraud. There was nothing exalted about Christ's life and death, he said, unless you had faith to see through them. To stand up in front of people twirling your tongue about them was to parade a fundamental misunderstanding of the gospel.

There is nothing in that gospel about being impressive or successful. There is nothing in it about being the biggest or the best at anything at all. The good news of God in Christ is that when the bottom has fallen out from under you—when you have crashed through all your safety nets and you can hear the bottom rushing up to meet you—the good news is that you cannot fall farther than God can catch you. You can't be too picky about where the catch happens, I'm afraid. Sometimes it happens after the funeral is over, as it did with Jesus, but the good news he brought back to us can never be revoked. God is stronger than death. Way past where we can see how it works, God is able to take our weakness, our fear, our trembling, and turn it into fullness of life.

Some of us get so excited about this news that we begin to think it is about us. Somewhere in the dark tunnels of our minds we turn God's power to save us into our own power to prosper

and a sly kind of triumphalism slips into our theology. We look to numbers and dollars for signs of our success instead of to the holiness of our life together. We build theaters instead of churches, where religious entertainment takes the place of worship. If we are not careful, we may start to sound like spiritual big shots, who speak of God's power as if it were the power to make us healthy, wealthy, and wise when of course it is nothing of the sort. The power of God is now and has always been the power to raise us from the dead. Period. It is not about us. It is about God. Our only role is to stick our feet straight up in the air and admit that without God we might as well be put to bed with a shovel.

Now that is a message that can empty a church out fast. "Hello. It is so lovely to see you all here this evening. My message tonight will be brief and to the point. God is not in the business of protecting us from harm, and no amount of good behavior will keep us safe. For evidence of this, see the cross. Instead, God is in the business of restoring us to life, which may involve some painful procedures. If we are willing to go through it and the operation is successful, our lives will not belong to us anymore. We will be God's gifts to the world, and our 'to do' lists will have no end. If the operation is really successful, our good works will get us killed. P.S. Every day will be full of fresh astonishment and we will never, ever get bored."

It is not a message that sells very well, because it runs counter to most human wisdom—which is, wisely enough, about how to make it in this world. The message of the cross, on the other hand, is about how to stop trying to make it in this world and fall in love with God instead. It is about God's power, not ours, which is why Paul was so suspicious of powerful preachers.

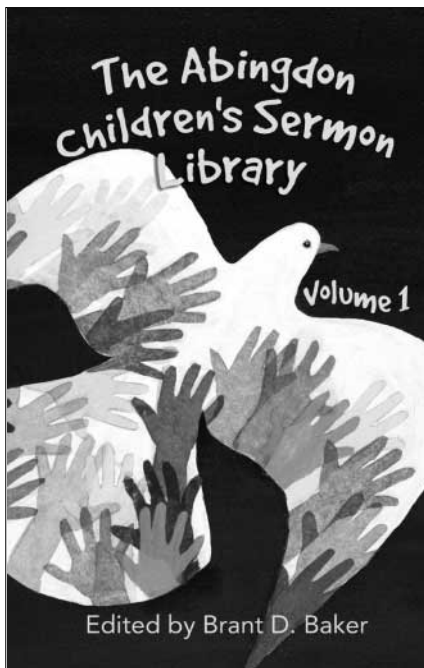
Some of you students of the sixties may remember Marshall McLuhan's slogan, "the medium is the message," by which he meant that what someone says is only as convincing as how

that person says it. Paul never read McLuhan, but he knew the same thing. To speak of Christ's painful surrender to God in loud, confident tones is a contradiction in terms. To have a garland put around your own neck for preaching about his self-sacrifice is crazy-making. Imagine, if you will, that Mother Teresa had a spokesman who was so good at what he did that he was in great demand, going from town to town eating big suppers and sleeping in fine hotels as he spoke about her work with the dying paupers of Calcutta. What is wrong with this picture?

The cross is such a hard, hard piece of the gospel that most of us cannot stay converted to it for long. It is God's wisdom, after all, "secret and hidden, which God has decreed before the ages for our glory." We believe it and then we don't, popping back into the wisdom of the world, which is about success, numbers, income, prizes. Our love of this wisdom is not just a problem for preachers. It is a problem for the whole church, which is always in danger of forgetting whose spokesperson it is.

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One reason we run from God's wisdom, I think, is because we do not know how to behave once we have surrendered our power. Do we just go limp now? Do we take the ads out of the newspaper, cancel the new building, hire preachers who will speak the plain truth about God with as little fanfare as possible? Probably not. We should probably go on trying to be the best we know how to be, using the best tools at hand. We just should not fool ourselves into thinking that we know what is really going on.

It is entirely possible that some of our proudest achievements are embarrassing to God, and some of our most dismal failures please God very much. There is simply no way of telling, since our wisdom is so different from God's wisdom. The only thing we can be sure of is that everything we offer up—ailing churches and prosperous ones, tongue-twirling preachers and those who struggle with every word—they are all eligible for the transforming power of God, who loves nothing better than bringing the dead back to life.

Meanwhile, the medium is the message. When we are able to give ourselves to that message without embezzling God's glory, when we are able to tell the story without cluttering it up with our own craving for success, then it becomes clearer to everyone (and especially to us) that God is the only fit object of our hearts' desires. All else is dust. □

**Barbara Brown Taylor is an Episcopal priest. She teaches at Piedmont College and Columbia Theological Seminary in Georgia. This article is reprinted with permission from *God in Pain* (Abingdon Press, 1998). See page 19 to order.**

