

**“A Scandalous and Foolish Kingdom” based on 1 Corinthians 1:17-31, Matthew 4:12-23, Isaiah 9:1-4  
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione, January 15, 2023, Shelby Presbyterian Church**

Delores Mission Church in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles has a nonprofit called, “Homeboy Industries,” which has received many bomb and death threats. So many, that the staff once contemplated changing their voicemail message, to something like: “Thank you for calling Homeboy Industries, your bomb threat is important to us.”

You see, “Homeboy Industries” has one mission – to give employment to gang members – especially those newly out of prison, in the hope that they might leave gang life, and escape the dangers of the street to find some meaning for their own life. And so, the members of rival gangs work side-by-side in a bakery, in a café, in a silk-screening T-shirt shop, and more. You can imagine the tension that can develop in that environment.

But here’s the thing: The threats didn’t come from the rival gang leaders or the members. No, the threats came from so-called “upstanding citizens” who were afraid, lashing out. Perhaps they feared any leniency showed to “criminals” and “hoodlums” might only embolden them to commit more crimes, hurt more people. And so, the “upstanding citizens” felt the need to fight back, by threatening their own violence and crime against a church, and against those trying to be free of gang life themselves.

Of course, perhaps the bomb threats are wrong, but these upstanding citizens have a point. After all, common sense says you would have to be a moron to trust gang members. What’s the saying, “A leopard doesn’t change its spots”? So then, neither do criminals.

Or maybe there should be some sign of their commitment to change. I mean what a scandal it would be if there was no sign, no proof, that these gang members had changed in some way, before you start putting them into the work force. It’s unwise to give a good job to someone who might just waste it. Or worse, use it to recruit others, to stumble into gang life.

Yet, at Delores Mission Church and Homeboy Industries, they love and trust gang members up front – first. In his book, “Tattoos on the Heart,” Pastor Greg Boyle explains this approach, admitting it’s foolish and bad business, but in each of his stories, you see, as he puts it, it’s about sharing God’s love one person at a time. This is done so that as we sing in ‘O Holy Night,’ even in “sin and error pining,” that love might come and “the soul will feel its worth.”

It is scandalous too, to think that Boyle and the staff at Homeboy Industries refuse to report gang memberships, alliances, and even crimes to the police. Mike Wallace on 60 minutes did a story on them and pressed Boyle on this in 1992, asking, “Why won’t you report them to the police?” Rev. Boyle, a Catholic Priest said, looking up, “I didn’t take my vows to the LAPD.” He continued, “I will talk to a kid, try to get him to turn himself in, and I hope that he will turn himself in and take responsibility...but beyond that, I don’t know what else, I could do. But I’m not going to go to the police.”

The police chief of LA back then, and a probation officer interviewed, struggle with this. They acknowledge some good in the Delores Mission Church programs, but think they are too lenient, not tough enough on these hardened criminals, some only 12 years old.

For Boyle, while it is heartbreaking when kids he loves, kill kids he loves, it reveals the expansiveness of God's love when rival gang members work side by side to share in each other's workplace struggles, reconciling their differences and becoming friends. They do this in a place where they feel loved and secure, not because they've earned it, but because they bear God's image.

What Boyle describes is the gospel, it is the good news of Jesus Christ in real life. You see, for God, it is heartbreaking to see humanity divided, always hurting one another. So, our belief as Christians is that God shared in our humanity sending the son to be one of us. By our sins, especially in our pride, we make God and neighbors our rivals. We think we're in competition.

But God called a people and sent the Son to fulfill their calling, to work side by side and share in our struggles as humans, all to reconcile us with God and one another. That is the "logos" of the cross. It is "reason" for the cross, as I translated Paul today for our reading. The "logos" is the word, the reason, the rationale, or the message and preaching, which is foolishness to those who are perishing, or those being destroyed. He does not say it is foolishness to those who "will be" destroyed. Instead, it means we are still in our sin, perishing, when we believe, that the Christ, meaning Israel's Messiah or anointed King, should be a great worldly power fighting fire with fire, or giving a clearcut sign to prove who he is and then with that, who is good and deserves life and who is bad and deserves death.

No, for Paul, who takes sin very seriously, we should see God's power in the cross. It is through proclaiming the cross and the resurrection that the world is truly changed. It is the laying down of power, as the Son set aside equality with God, and regarding others, even our enemies or rivals, as sisters and brothers, friends, fellow citizens in God's Kingdom. We are heirs to the life of the Son, who shared in our life, died for us, and rose again for us. He did this all so that we might share in the Son's inheritance with renewed life now, for which the Holy Spirit, makes us God's temples dwelling in us, as a down payment for all eternity.

Paul says this after, as we read last week, calling on the church to lay down its divisions, to end the constant battle for superiority on the world's terms and be one in Christ. He says we are preaching the humility and love of the cross, our anointed King crucified, who is the rightful King of every single nation, all of them, all of us. It doesn't matter if you are Jew or Greek, an Israelite or a Gentile, an intellectual or uneducated, strong or weak, rich or poor. The one hanged on a Roman cross and who rose again is calling all people to be one in him, regardless of their nation, or race, or even who their religious leader is, or the tradition they follow.

But this kind of message is 'moros' in Greek, the root of our word "moron," meaning foolish. To the wise and philosophical Greeks and Romans, they, like us, know better than that. After all, they know the dead are dead, especially after a crucifixion and common sense rejects the cross. Common sense rejects a unity among Gentiles and Jews that does not depend on the Jews, like

all others, acting Roman. The wisdom of the Greeks and our common sense today says that unity requires a level of conformity, singularity, and assimilation in culture. This was what Alexander sought making everyone speak Greek and what Rome sought also, making everyone worship their gods, including worship of the emperor.

And this kind of message is also 'scandalon' in Greek, the root of our word "scandal," which means a stumbling block, which it is to the Jews who hear this message. This is because there is no sign, no undoubtable providence, to make clear its truth. Sure, there may have been a resurrection, but now the Christians struggle, and so, there should be a sign that they have God's favor, if they do. All this ignorance of the law then will only make Jews stumble and fall into sin for something that may not be true. Today, we still want signs, proof on our terms, that we are particularly blessed, to prove we are on the right path. We hear it in "clearly" a mega church is blessed, since there are more people.

In our gospel reading today, Matthew ties the beginning of Jesus's ministry to Isaiah, citing the bringing of light to a people in darkness. The people of the Northern Kingdom which had been dishonored, or lightly afflicted, or even seen in contempt, would be made glorious according to the prophet. For the Jews who returned from exile to the province of Judea, they were centered on Jerusalem, and so, the Jews of Galilee, were a "separated brethren," out in the rural countryside. They didn't worship right, since they didn't come to the temple enough. They didn't talk right, with their country accent in Aramaic. They didn't live right, as there was too much Greek influence in that part of the country.

So, Jesus goes from Nazareth in Galilee but closer to Judea's border, into Judea, and back out, deeper into Galilee, on to Capernaum. It is there, that he proclaims the good news, or gospel, that the Kingdom of God is at hand, calling on the people to repent, or be changed in their minds, or to turn back to God. This is the message John the Baptist preached clearing the path for Jesus, and now Jesus takes it up anew. He catches the attention of some men who are fishing for a living. Each day, they cast nets into the sea and pull in fish for the market.

He finds Simon, who has a good Hebrew name, Shimon, meaning "to listen, or to hear." But there's his brother, Andrew, a Greek name, meaning "human" or "humanity" or "man." (I know the word's meaning since it's my name too.) From the start, we see then that there is a multicultural aspect of what Jesus is doing.

Because with them, Jesus calls James and John, both Hebrew names, "Yakov" and "Yoannis." You can start to see the tension within the apostles and its roots right from the start. Simon and Andrew likely come from a more Greek influenced Jewish family, while James and John likely come from a more traditional one. Yet, Jesus calls them together and gives them a new job.

Jesus says, 'Come here and get behind me, or come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men, of people, of humanity.' My sisters and brothers, the upstanding citizens who worry about Homeboy Industries, and who made those threats are, by worldly standards, acting reasonably. I don't doubt that they believe themselves justified, and in the right here because, after all, they are not the gang members, criminals, or hoodlums. By default, they define themselves, just as

we might, as the “good guys and gals,” but in their eyes the gang members are “irredeemably bad.” This is human nature to feel this way. The Greeks want wisdom and the Jews want signs, and so something so radical – love – while we are still sinners, unearned and freely given, without priority, is God’s way. For real.

It is foolish to do this, whether with gang members, or with our neighbors and ourselves, because the world says we have to shape up first. The message of the cross is that Christ died for all people while we were still sinners, and the incarnation of God in our human flesh to die and rise again for us, is grace – it’s a gift that is unmerited to us, and freely given to us. This can be hard to grasp for ourselves and even harder to apply. Yet, this is what needs to change in our minds, what we need to turn to. This is repentance.

Because if we truly trusted that we are beloved, and that God was not judging us with some set of scales putting good on one side, bad on the other, we might learn to love as God loves, and stop judging others, calling some ‘hoodlums’ and others ‘upstanding.’ We might set aside all the other terms we use to see people not by their humanity, but by our judgement.

My sisters and brothers, you are God’s beloved and Christ pursues you, each and every one of you by name. With that love, God gives you forgiveness, salvation, and new life. This is yours upfront, not based on what you have done, or what the world says you are, but based on Christ.

As Paul wrote, “God has chosen what is foolish in this world, in order that the wise might be shamed. And God has chosen what is weak in this world, in order that the strong might be shamed. And God also chose the lowborn and worthless things in this world, and things that do not exist, in order that he might abolish things that exist, so that all flesh would not be able to boast before God.”

When we justify ourselves and condemn others, we boast before God. But when we admit our own faults without excuses and welcome others to know God’s love with us, then we “boast in the Lord” and in the foolishness of the cross. This is foolish and scandalous, and this is what God’s Kingdom really is.

Out at Delores Church there are stories of sadness. But there are also stories of hope – stories of people changing their lives. And so, when Mike Wallace on 60 minutes was so incredulous about Boyle refusing to turn in these children, he asked a group of gang members why they think their priest would protect them. One of them responded, “God, I guess.” To which Boyle agreed. And so, I want to leave you then, with a quote from Tattoos on the Heart, that I think echoes the words of the Apostle Paul, and challenges us today.

Boyle writes: “Not much in my life makes any sense outside of God. Certainly, a place like homeboy industries is all folly and bad business unless the core of the endeavor seeks to imitate the kind of God one ought to believe in. In the end, I’m helpless to explain why anyone would accompany those on the margins, were it not for some anchored belief that the ground of all being thought this was good idea.” Amen.