

What shape is your life? Have you ever thought about that before?

What shape is your life? Not- what shape are you in, but, if you were to sketch out your day to day living, how you understand the way you live, what would it look like?

For example, a very busy person might describe their life as being lived on a hamster wheel, running around and around, fast, furious and repetitive.

A determined and organized person might describe their life as a staircase, moving forward one step at a time, no more or no less, methodically just so.



A person in a life transition might describe their life looking like an unwound ball of yarn, a scattered tangle with a mix of knots, twists and bunches, all very difficult to sort out.

Here's another way to think about the shape of your life... how the apostle Paul saw it... in the shape of a cross. Direction, inspiration, guidance came from above and was to be communicated, shared and lived out evenly and equally side to side. A cross-shaped life, (or as Dr. Michael Gorman likes to call it; a 'cruciform' life), is a fitting model for both understanding the apostle Paul's letters and for modeling one's life's mission as well.

This will get us started today.

I've also been thinking a lot about these letters Paul wrote; even the character of letters in general. His letters are dynamic documents, responses in 'real time' to situations that arose in the life of a believing, practicing community of faith. They are reactions to 'events on the ground', not necessarily of Paul's making. And as they are reactions, we don't always know exactly what it was that Paul was reacting to in the first place.

What we do know is that these people were believers, struggling with real questions about how to live faithfully, trying to understand what living with Jesus as Lord meant. The same is true for us.

Keeping these two dynamics in mind; the 'shape' of our lives and the responsive nature of writing letters, we begin looking at a new situation for Paul, in Corinth.

Paul's correspondence with the Corinthians was prodigious and profound.

Between the two letters included in our Bibles, and perhaps two more that we don't have, Paul wrote more words to the Corinthian congregation than any other. He first visited them in 49AD, following his visit to Athens after a lackluster performance at the Areopagus where, as Luke tells us (Acts 17:32-34), his preaching was summarily dismissed. Upon entering Corinth, Paul may have felt a bit vulnerable but was met with unexpected welcome and hospitality.

The city of Corinth was different from Athens in many ways. It was a new city, which sounds odd, but is true. The Romans had destroyed the city, leveled it to the ground, in 146BC (which is what the Romans did), but then they rebuilt it about a hundred years later. So 'new' Corinth, as it were, was just over a hundred years old.



Situated between two sea ports, it offered the kind of cultural and economic diversity few towns could claim. Corinth was a place where traditions converged, many languages were spoken and ideas were exchanged as eagerly as money for exotic foods and spices. Like other Roman cities, Corinth was highly stratified socially, with citizens (immigrants from the Italian Peninsula), native Greeks (largely non-citizens), other foreigners, and slaves. The city was a cosmopolitan crossroads of culture, commerce and controversy.

Accompanied by his friend Sosthenes, Paul's message somehow struck gold, at least for a time. Fascinating studies have been done about the 'church' of Corinth; actually, they were house churches, varying in the size of homes, the families and social status of those involved... all in this relatively new 'upwardly mobile' community. Estimates range there being between 200-300 people in total in the various house churches of Corinth, in groups of 20-50, which in itself was likely a source of difference and disagreement, along with the fact that 'the church' itself was a new 'start up' organization made of a mix of former pagans and converted Jews.

Yet as it turned out, the work of the Spirit empowered the gospel to take root.

A year and a half after his stay with them, when Paul was called away to Ephesus, he left behind a collection of believers that was a microcosm of Corinth. Rich and poor, Gentile and

Jew, male and female, slave and free, all were part of a fellowship of the Spirit, despite the dynamics of a place that told them this was impossible. Paul must have considered this fellowship a miracle and yet still likely had his doubts. How could this body remain whole in the midst of such diversity in heritage, expectation, world-view and tradition?

His doubts were well-founded. Rivalries existed between leaders, both women and men; Chloe, Apollos, Stephanas, and Fortunatas, to name a few. After his departure it wasn't long before the worldly ways of this city seeped into the cracks of the church and began to do insidious damage, to which Paul responds with a letter, a kind of grocery list of infractions against the gospel. Christians in Corinth had begun committing immoral acts. They were suing each other and refusing to eat together at the Lord's Supper. Some were setting themselves apart by virtue of their spiritual gifts. They had more questions than answers and had nowhere to turn for guidance.

The unity of the body into which they had been baptized was threatened. It was up to Paul to instruct them as to the nature of the body of Christ. This task begins in this opening chapter and concludes with Paul's famous chapter on love.

To the outsider, Paul insists that proclaiming Christ crucified is sheer folly (*moria*). In today's vernacular, we might say that this message could only appeal to a group of "morons," a ship of fools. This is a more appropriate image than you might think. According to Paul the body of Christ is a new ark, a spiritual vessel kept afloat by a divine wisdom in which strength is revealed in human weakness, and ultimate good news arrives in the shape of the cross.

For the Greeks this was nonsense. Since the time of Plato, philosophers had been wary of any Truth associated with the world of change. Ultimate truth, they argued, forever remains apart from the flux of nature and stays immutable in its perfection.

The gods did not take on human form to be crucified and resurrected. This was the message that sent Paul packing in Athens. The 'shape of life', if you will, according to the Greeks, was two parallel lines running above and below, rarely if ever meeting, and in the instances that it happened it was random, capricious and ultimately meaningless. Humans were playthings of the gods, and people did well to be wary of them.

Similarly, Jews had their own stumbling block. For centuries they had sought signs from the prophets that the 'day of the Lord' was upon them. By the first century this apocalyptic hope had taken a number of forms: the messiah would be a heavenly figure coming on the clouds as a warrior king; the messiah would be a priest of the Temple. Jesus of Nazareth was none of these. Indeed, he was killed on a tree and cursed, as Moses attested (Deuteronomy 21:23). To proclaim this Jesus as hope and salvation was not only foolish, it was blasphemy. Indeed, before his conversion Paul himself lived this belief out, persecuting those who called Jesus Lord, a claim that to him at the time made no sense and dishonored the name of the Holy One.

The 'shape of life' in a Jewish sense might be a Star of David, interlocking triangles of relationship, called to be together yet empty in the center- still open and waiting for fulfillment.



The apostle Paul's message was all about the death of the Messiah on the cross and his resurrection by God, which validated the message of his life. It was the values of Jesus that the faithful at Corinth were being called to uphold. While conventional logic required that they consider each other according to the customs of the culture - poor or rich, Gentile or Jew, slave or free, male or female, - the presence of Christ in their lives demanded that they live their lives based on a new story.

The appearance of Jesus was an anomaly, a new and unexpected revelation. That a convicted criminal was the bearer of God's forgiving and transforming love was difficult for anybody to accept and for some especially so. For Hellenized sophisticates - the Greeks, as Paul puts it - it could only seem absurd. What uglier, more embarrassingly inappropriate symbol of Plato's 'Beautiful and Good' could there be than a crucified Jew? And for the devout Jew, what more scandalous image of the Davidic king – a dead messiah, before whose majesty all the nations were at last to come to bow?



Paul understood both reactions well. "The folly of what we preach" is what he called it, and he knew it was nonsense not just to the intellectually and religiously inclined but to the average Corinthian who simply wanted some reasonably plausible God who would be reliable when the going got rough.

Paul's God didn't look much like what they were after, and Paul was the first to admit it. But somehow this Jesus was someone who could be believed in. This was something new, to put trust into one who had suffered and died at the hands of Rome, to place faith in one who gave up his life, only to be brought back to life again by God.

There was something new, powerful, hopeful and compelling about this Jesus. Somehow people could find themselves at the intersection of the cross, between the goodness of God and the harsh realities of this world, and they joined others in meeting Jesus there.

It's something that's been going on ever since. The paradox of the cross and the foolishness of God is not something we generally talk about; we take it all for granted as part of the way things have been for 2,000 years now. It takes something special to call our attention to the miracle of God's grace in Jesus.

It can come to us in different ways.

There's an old prayer (well, not really THAT old, 1863) from the U.S. Civil War, alleged to have been found on the body of a Confederate soldier who was killed in the battle of Gettysburg, at Devil's Den. Some of you have heard this before, I know, but it begins to embody the paradox of Christ, child of God, yet crucified... risen, yet no longer with us. The words may bring us closer to the stark realities of the mercy, wonder and ultimate truth of God that meets us all in our cross-shaped lives.

I asked God for strength that I might achieve,
I was made weak that I might learn to humbly obey.
I asked for health that I might do greater things,
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.
I asked for riches that I might be happy,
I was given poverty that I might be wise.
I asked for power that I might have the praise of men,
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for all things that I might enjoy life,
I was given life that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing I asked for — but everything I had hoped for.
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
I am among all most richly blessed.

May such wisdom compel our church ship. May our eyes be opened, our hearts be filled, and our hands be busy with sharing the grace, love and compassion of God in Jesus. Amen.