Sunday, January 28, 1996
GOD'S FOOLISHNESS
I Corinthians 1:18-31

As one year ends and a new one begins, magazines and newspapers frequently carry articles on what they consider to have been the top news stories of the year just ended. Some of them also highlight their choices for the most important people in the news. TIME Magazine always names its "Person of the Year."

I don't know about you, but the older I get, the more amused I am by these choices. As I read one religious magazine's article on the "Top Religious News Stories of 1995," I thought to myself, "Who cares? What difference does it make? By what criteria were these stories chosen over others?"

A number of years ago, LIFE Magazine devoted one entire issue to a list of what it called the 100 most important people. This list was comprised of men and women, all alive at that time, who had arrived or were on their way to positions of influence and power in their chosen profession or vocation.

What were the top news stories in 1995? I have no idea. Furthermore, what seems important today or last year is often insignificant in the future. Who are the most important people in today's world? It all depends on your assumptions.

Someday a magazine or newspaper should publish an edition about the forgotten or unnoticed important people. Who would be on that list? Maybe the hospital worker who empties bedpans and cleans the room? Or how about the restroom attendant at the airport or the individual in charge of building maintenance? The corrections officer in the county jail or state prison? The polite, efficient waitress in the corner restaurant? The list could go on and on, filled with faithful people who go about performing their duties at work and at home in a quiet and responsible manner — ordinary people, we sometimes call them — individuals who bear their burdens and, more importantly, help others bear theirs.

The list of ordinary people might include those mentioned in a letter that appeared in a daily newspaper in another city. The writer said, "It was a joy to witness the following chain reaction on a city bus last week. A crippled white woman boarded a bus in midtown. There was no vacant seat. A young Black woman rose immediately and offered the crippled woman her seat. An elderly white man, who had been sitting next to the Black woman, got up, thanked her for her courtesy, and offered her his seat. Then, a young boy sitting beside his mother jumped to his feet and offered the elderly man his seat. When the crippled woman left the bus, another passenger who got off ahead of her turned and helped her to the curb."

These people would not have made the list in LIFE Magazine, but as the Bible says, "Of such is the kingdom of God." These are the kind of people St. Paul was writing about in his letter to the church at Corinth.

"For consider your call, sisters and brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

St. Paul was reminding the Corinthians — and us — that, contrary to what we usually believe, God frequently uses what we might consider weak and foolish ordinary people to carry out God's purposes.

That's the first point of the sermon. That's what the story of Jesus is all about. A baby is born to an ordinary couple, grows up in a small town in an out-of-the-way place, and is unknown until he is 30 years old. Then he begins to tell people about a God who loves and forgives them, about a God whose purposes are being carried out in this creation. His enemies are the so-called important and influential people of the time — the leaders in the temple and the government officials.

After several years, he is arrested, tried, and executed like a common criminal. None of these events would have been considered one of the top news stories of the year. But the power and love of God that Jesus revealed would not stay dead. It could not be sealed in a tomb. His closest followers are surprised that he is alive and with them in a new way. And so ordinary people, those who were considered foolish, spread and live his message.

We still have difficulty believing that God chooses what is foolish in the world, what is weak, what is low and despised. We have difficulty believing that God can and does use ordinary people like you and me. We forget that it is in the vanity, vulnerability, and insecurity of human life that ministry happens and God's love is revealed. God is at work when one person reaches out to another.

Several days ago, I received the following letter:

"I work at the Lincoln Correctional Center in the segregated confinement section, which houses violent, predatory inmates, many of whom are members of gangs. They are locked in their rooms, alone, nearly all the time and are not allowed to attend religious services. I am one of ten caseworkers, and we manage their day-to-day living needs. We cover the unit 16 hours a day, 365 days a year.

"I watch for signs of readiness for change that the solitary living environment often brings into the men, and when I see it, I stop in and visit with them privately. I let God direct my words. Sometimes I listen to their woes, and sometimes I urge them to pray and ask God to come into their lives. I usually start with a story, something from history that has come into my mind during prayer that I should tell a particular inmate, then I spread it to others as well. They always thank me, and they often ask if I have another story for them when I approach their rooms.

"Although I worked last Sunday morning, I was able to get away to attend church and hear your sermon. When I returned to work, I began repeating your sermon, one inmate at a time, to those I felt were ready to hear it. I also carried forward your theme of trusting God's purpose for people, applying it to opportunities at that moment to help each other. I thought you might like to know this — that your words echoed all the way back to seven violent men living in a prison on the outskirts of town last Sunday, and that the retelling had already begun before you even finished eating lunch."

Hear it again: God frequently uses ordinary people to carry out God's purposes. That's not usually what the world would have us believe.

I say that because I am convinced that in our time, perhaps more than ever before, we are over-impressed by image and by celebrities.

How do you explain our growing craving for celebrity secrets? I believe it's because we have become increasingly disillusioned with life around us. Many among us have a preference for what some call "cultural players," such as movie stars and celebrity athletes, whose efforts exist purely on the level of fantasy. We have created a culture of fantasy at the expense of a culture of reality.

Because of the increase in technology, this culture of fantasy has grown so large that it threatens to overwhelm the culture of reality. It's easy to become more and more oriented to fantasy activities at the expense of reality activities. Reality deals with such tough issues as suffering, struggle, power, and loss. It asks something of us, makes demands, calls for renunciation or deferred gratification. The culture of fantasy asks nothing of us, since its function is to gratify, to create the illusion that life is smooth and without rupture.

Real life takes time, energy, and concentration, and it introduces ambiguity into our experience. Celebrities and performers ask nothing of us. They give the pleasurable illusion that life can be effortless and without ambiguities.

Some among us go on to believe that we have to be like the celebrity to be considered important by others and by God. Otherwise, why do we get so excited when a celebrity endorses the Christian faith, or when a celebrity writes a book about their religious beliefs?

For that matter, why should anyone be impressed when a celebrity endorses anything? Are they experts on motor oil, breakfast cereal, toothpaste, automobiles, or underwear? I'm not blaming the celebrity. His or her religious faith may be as genuine, or more genuine, than ours.

It's significant that in the New Testament accounts of Jesus' ministry, he never sought endorsement by any of the so-called important people of his time. Of course, he didn't reject them either. He did, however, reject celebrity status for himself.

When he healed someone out of love and compassion, he told the individual to tell no one. He didn't want to become famous as a healer. He didn't want people following him for the wrong reasons. He didn't want a fan club. He knew that people following him merely because he was a celebrity would not change anyone's life. He knew, too, that the tactics that can sell detergents are not the kind that can produce commitment to following God's will.

God is not impressed by technique, celebrity status, or people of worldly power and influence. Remember, it was Jesus who said over and over, "The first shall be last and the last first." God's celebrities are quite different from the world's celebrities.

God's will and God's love often shine most brightly through the lives and actions of ordinary people whose names will never make the headlines. As an example for us, Jesus pointed to the unnamed poor widow as she put two copper coins into the collection box. God's love is shown and lived out in the millions of unknown individuals who are faithful day in and day out, who keep their commitments, and who treat other people with kindness and respect, no matter who they are. Such people never talk about their good deeds. In fact, they are surprised that anyone would even think of them as doing good.

Remember a few years ago when there was a story about a woman no one ever heard of until some survivors of the Nazi death camps in Germany found her? Natalia Abramovitch provided shelter in her home for a Jewish family and saved their lives while she risked her own. She was put in prison for harboring Jews but after the war finally found her way to this country and lived in poverty and obscurity until rediscovered by a man whose life she had saved. Natalia would never have been asked to be a guest on a celebrity television program. She's an ordinary person. "Of such is the kingdom of God."

I repeat, God uses ordinary people to carry out God's purposes.

Secondly, it's part of God's foolishness that God can and does use even our weaknesses and our liabilities, those places where we hurt and suffer our wounds.

God doesn't need an army of "holier-than-thou" people running around with halos, wearing their religion on their sleeves. God needs listening, caring people who know what suffering is — ordinary people of quiet faith. God can even use our weaknesses and suffering to reach out to bring Christ's loving presence to those who need it.

However, here a word of caution is needed. We can very easily misuse our sufferings or weaknesses by making them a form of spiritual exhibitionism.

Henri Nouwen, in his book The Wounded Healer, puts it this way: "Spiritual exhibitionism adds little faith to little faith and creates narrow-mindedness instead of new perspectives. Open wounds stink and do not heal. Making one's own wounds a source of healing, therefore, does not call for a sharing of superficial personal pains, but for a constant willingness to see one's own pain and suffering as rising from the depth of the human condition which all people share."

Our weaknesses and our wounds can be helpful teachers and reminders of our own condition and of our neighbor's condition, and then healing can begin to take place. So it is that ordinary people can be used by God to bring hope and healing to others. That's part of God's foolishness.

Third, God's foolishness tells us that it is neither pride of intellect, nor civic position, nor wealth, nor power, nor status, nor prestige that count in the eyes of God. Remember the Beatitudes— "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."

The humble-minded and the unsophisticated — in other words, ordinary people — are oftentimes the most capable of experiencing the loving presence of God and then passing it on to others. This is good news for all of us. Amen.