

SR02114 First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

The Rev. Dr. John Judson

Foundations: Obey

February 2, 2014

Genesis 11:1-9;

I Corinthians 1:18-31

Formatted: Centered

It was a tale of two dogs. The first dog was Jack. He belonged to Bruce, who was a teacher at my wife's school. After several years of working for Cindy, Bruce and his wife Myra invited us over to dinner. When we arrived we spotted their dog. Now, their dog was not what anyone would call attractive. It was a mixed breed, three legged, one eyed rescue dog. My first inclination was to feel sorry for the dog...and its owners; that was until Bruce showed me what his dog could do. At the appropriate command it would sit, lie down, roll over and heel. Bruce however saved the best part for last. He had his dog sit. Then Bruce balanced a dog biscuit on the dog's snout. The dog did not move. Then at some command the dog flipped the biscuit into the air and ate it. This was the most obedient dog I had ever seen. The second dog belonged to Cindy and me. Her name was Lucy. She was a wonderful dog, but obedience was not in her vocabulary. She would jump on visitors. Sneak out under the fence and run away. She would even crawl up on the couch when we were away. We loved her. She loved us. But obedience...not.

The question before you this morning is this, which of these dogs best represents humanity? Right, it is Lucy...and that lack of obedience is at the heart of both of our stories this morning. The first is the very familiar story of the Tower of Babel. Here we have a vision of humanity all gathered together in one place, the land of Shinar. They know what it is that God has commanded them to do. They are to multiply, spread out across the face of the earth and care for God's creation. That was their task. Were they going to do it? Uh, no. Their response to God's command was to try to build a tower into heaven, with the intent to storm paradise and overthrow God in order that they be allowed to stay where they were. And even though we all know this is not quite right, over the years I have had people rooting for the folks at Babel because they were exerting their independence.

Our second story is also about obedience, or a lack of it, though it is not quite so obvious. So we will recap. The Apostle Paul founded a church in the city of Corinth. At first things went well while he was there. The people had accepted their new identity and appeared to understand that their calling was to be followers of Jesus Christ, who cooperated in such a way as to show the world what a loving community ought to look like. As soon as Paul left, things began to fall apart. The people were fighting with one another. The people were creating factions. The people were diminishing others while elevating themselves. Why were they doing this? Paul tells us in this part of the letter. The people were doing these things because they believed that they knew more than did God. They believed that the cross was foolishness. They knew that the wisdom of the Roman Empire, that of class consciousness and the exertion of power, was more

realistic than the sacrificial lives which Christ called his followers to live. They were going to have no part of the culture than the command of Christ to love one another even as Christ has loved them. Obedience was not going to be part of their community.

There are two fascinating things contained in Paul's response. First he agrees with the Corinthians that the cross is foolishness. Paul understands that from a purely human perspective a crucified messiah and a call to sacrificial living is indeed foolish. No person would consciously choose to love and sacrifice as Jesus did. However he also reminded the Corinthians that they would only be saved through God's foolishness and not through their own wisdom. "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe...for God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom." Paul then moves to prove his point. He reminded the Corinthians that if God had been wise according to the ways of the world, then God would never have chosen them to be part of God's community; "...not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what was foolish in the world to shame the wise." In other words, ladies and gentleman, he intones, you only know the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ because God was foolish enough to sacrifice his only son on your behalf and then call you to be God's own. Left to your own devices you would be completely lost. In essence Paul is saying...even if you think it's foolish, obey the call to love because in obedience to God in Christ you will find your salvation.

Obedience, even obedience to love as Christ loved, is never easy. Most of us would rather make all of our decisions than have someone else make them for us. Yet if we are willing to be obedient to God we can become more fully human than we ever thought possible. How so? It is the way of Jack. Remember, when Bruce and Myra went to the shelter and saw Jack, what they saw was a mangy, mixed-breed, three-legged, one-eyed dog. In the eyes of the world this was a dog that no one would have wanted. Yet for them it was love at first site. Bruce then lovingly trained Jack to be obedient and in so doing turned Jack into a dog that was envied by family and friends alike. Jack went from being a forgotten animal to a dog capable of doing almost anything. This is what God desires to do for us. If we, like Jack, are willing to be obedient to God, God will make us into amazing human beings and help us become part of an amazing community.

My challenge to you this morning then is this; as you come to the communion table I would have you ask yourselves this question, "How am I working to be obedient to God's call upon my life that I might become the person God as created me to be?"