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The Foolish Call to Love

(1 Corinthians 1:26–31)

M. Craig Barnes

President M. Craig Barnes delivered this farewell to the graduates at the 205th Commencement Ceremony of Princeton Theological Seminary, held in the Princeton University Chapel on Saturday, May 20, 2017.

The Apostle Paul has some piercing counsel for the graduates of this year's class: "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters ..."

I have discovered that one of the easiest ways to start an in-depth conversation with seminarians is to bring up the subject of calling. Some of you came here because you felt a calling from God. Others of you came here in order to search for that calling. And still others may remain confused by exactly what it means to be called by God, although I encourage you to work that out before you begin to interview for a job.

Even those outside of the professional ministry are very interested in finding a calling. The late Vaclav Havel, served many years of imprisonment in hard labor for resistance to his totalitarian government before he became the celebrated first president of the free Czech Republic. During this imprisonment he smuggled out some of his deep reflections on life under the guise of letters to his wife. These reflections were later published in a book titled *Letters to Olga*. In one of the letters he claims he can withstand any adversity if he just knows his responsibility because the secret of human beings is the secret of their responsibility.

This is the secret we most want the still small voice of the Holy Spirit to whisper in our ears. We want a holy response to the persistent questions "What is my responsibility?" "What is my calling?"

When someone makes an appointment with me to talk about calling, I know it probably won't be long before we are talking about job descriptions. But that is not really the concern of the Apostle Paul whose job description was to make tents.

The call, the secret of your life to use Havel's terms, the source of your life to use the Apostle Paul's terms, is to know the wisdom of God.

In the wisdom of God, you were made righteous, Paul claims, redeemed and sanctified by Christ Jesus crucified. So you were redeemed and made righteous by a Savior who was literally dying to love you. And to experience sanctification means that as you find your life in Christ you will be dying to love others. This is God's idea of wisdom.

These had to be strange words to the Greeks in Corinth who, like you, admired wisdom and spent years of hard work trying to obtain it. There was not much in their tradition that claimed it was wise to find yourself on a cross. There was even less in the Roman tradition that used the cross as one of their favorite means of execution. And in the places where you will be called to

serve, all of the so-called wisdom you will receive will be devoted to strategies for avoiding the cross.

In the days ahead you're going to get so much advice. It will come from the chair of the search committee that hired you. If you become a pastor, it will come from the angry member who's been in the church too long. (Just to remind you, congregations don't have graduations.) The advice will come from books, blogs, podcasts. It will come from your spouse, friends, covenant group, or your guild. When you get home after an exhausting day, and remember to call your mother, she will tell you that you're working too hard. These people care about you and want you to succeed, so they are offering you their wisdom. But few of them will bring up the foolishness of taking up your own cross as a means of following a call to be dying to love.

Even our brains are not wired to think loving is wise or rational. In a recent *New York Times* article, the psychiatrist Anna Fels tried to make sense of the suicide bombers who killed 44 worshipers in Egyptian churches last Palm Sunday.¹ Her claim is that several of the brain's regions have areas that are known to generate aggression. So our hate, cunning, revenge can appear very rational. We can convince ourselves, even to the point of self-destruction, that it is wise to hurt those who threaten our beliefs. But this isn't limited to crazed suicide bombers.

It is also why our society thinks it is wise to blame the mythical "them" for our problems. We keep hearing, "They are not like us." "They want to take something away from you." "They don't belong here, and must be excluded." And then the hurting begins. Hate rationally takes its time, makes plans, seeks revenge, devises schemes.

By contrast, Dr. Fels claims, love deactivates the areas of the brain that generate reasoning. This is why we say things like, "I fell in love." It is as if to say "I was walking along, on a rational course for my life, but I tripped, I fell, in love."

When I speak to couples in premarital counseling, I eventually ask each of them, "Why do you love this person?" This is when they hold hands and look at each other. The face of the person answering the question says, "Okay, I know this is really important." And then the stammering starts. But they cannot come up with anything that rationally explains why they are in love. Eventually they say something like, "I don't know ... I just have to spend my life with this person." It is fascinating that they can tell me exactly why they chose their professions, and why they prefer a Honda to a Chevy, or Cheerios to Wheaties. But the rationality isn't coming when they try to explain why they are about to make a holy covenant with this person.

I am a strong believer in rationality and have devoted much of life to pursuing it. I'm so devoted that I know rationality's limitations.

"Consider your own call," the Apostle Paul tells us. "It wasn't because you were so wise that God called you. God has chosen the foolish to confound the wise." These lines don't make it into a lot of commencement addresses. But it isn't meant to be a slam on the day of your graduation.

¹ Anna Fels, "The Point of Hate," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2017.

And it has nothing to do with how smart you are. It is meant to reveal your calling. This is a call to the wisdom confounding activity of dying to love, which beckons you to surrender your life to the community God has given you to serve. After all you have worked so hard to learn, it sounds foolish that you are now called to give it all away. In the wisdom of God your calling is to take up the cross, dying to love.

Wherever it is that you will find yourself following Christ when you leave Princeton Theological Seminary, it will not be long before you discover that nothing of eternal significance is going to happen until you give up. You are called to give up your dreams and your criticism of community, your well-deserved expertise, all of the other voices on the panel discussion in your mind, and especially your anxieties about how to succeed. Surrender to the call to love. Only then will God's dreams for your community arise. And only then will you discover holy wisdom. Amen.