

Jon Hauerwas – January 15, 2017 – Justice  
1 Corinthians 1:18-31 and Matthew 5:1-12

When the Corinthians debated issues of wisdom, they were not simply engaging in intellectual or theological argument. Instead, they were “competing for status. Wisdom and its cultured speech earned status in the in the culture of Paul’s time. Sages, skilled in rhetoric, claimed status for themselves and exploited others for their own ends.”<sup>1</sup>

The teaching of these sages drew its power from the system already established, whereby power and status were extended to a teacher and to what he taught based upon how eloquently and persuasively he spoke. When the hearers gave authority to a speaker, his status rose. Yet, “like a balloon whose inflation depends on constant pumping, so the sage and his teaching depended for their authority on constant maintenance” – of being puffed up by the hearers.<sup>2</sup>

The apostle Paul suggested a different path forward. He argued that “the gospel’s power depends on nothing but God’s own power and not at all on the social and cultural conventions of power.” In fact, “some of the claims of the gospel crash

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<sup>1</sup> J. Paul Sampley, *First Corinthians, The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary Volume X*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 2002), 812.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 812.

head-on into such status seeking, and Paul does everything within his rhetorical power” to make this point.<sup>3</sup>

In 1 Corinthians, Paul contends that “talk of the cross – the ultimate symbol of shame, humiliation, and rejection – will strike nonbelievers as ‘folly’; but for believers it is the very power that is transforming their lives.” Moreover, “‘Christ crucified,’ the very heart of the gospel proclamation, is a profound shock to the hearer. Nothing could be more unlikely than that redemption should come through the humiliating crucifixion of someone. Nothing could be more alien to the culture, its social structures and practices.” This gospel is scandalous because it is a challenge to all rival values. So naturally, to hear the scandal of this gospel will either elicit opposition or provide the foundation for a shocking and complete turnabout in one’s self.<sup>4</sup>

Here I want to tell you a story from our nation’s past, which comes from the life of Vernon Dahmer. Fifty years ago, in January of 1966, Dahmer served as the music director and was a Sunday school teacher at his church. He was also the president of the local NAACP chapter in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 812.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 812 – 813.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.npr.org/2017/01/13/509495656/what-one-family-sacrificed-to-help-black-people-vote-in-1966>.

Accessed on January 14, 2017.

At that time, residents of Mississippi were still required to pay a \$2 poll tax in order to register to vote. On January 10, Dahmer, a successful farmer and businessman publicly declared on a local radio station that he would pay the poll tax for any poor blacks who could not afford it.

“We didn’t think anybody would bother the children,” said Dahmer’s widow, Ellie. But, “we were wrong.” “That night his house was firebombed by the Ku Klux Kan. Vernon, Ellie, and three of their children were home. Ellie awoke to a house on fire. It was so bright and hot, she remembers. She was screaming at the top of her voice, “Lord, have mercy. We’re going to get burned up in this house alive.” Ellie raised the window up and went outside. Vernon stayed inside and began handing the children to his wife through the window.

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Smoking ruins of Vernon Dahmer's house in the Kelly Settlement of Hattiesburg, Miss., the morning it was firebombed on Jan. 10, 1966.

[\*Moncrief Photograph Collection, ID #510, Mississippi Department of Archives & History\*](#)

The family escaped to the barn to hide, sitting on bales of hay. Daughter Bettie, who was 10 years old at the time, recalls the evening this way. “I had burns over a good portion of my body, and I was screaming and crying because I was in pain. Daddy was burned so much worse than I was – when he held up his arm the skin just hung down – but Daddy never did complain, he was just concerned about me. I remember us going to the hospital.”



Ellie Dahmer (left) and her daughter Bettie outside Ellie's home, which was built in the same place as the house that was destroyed in a KKK firebomb that killed Ellie's husband, Vernon, in 1966.

*StoryCorps*

Vernon and Bettie shared a hospital room, with Ellie sitting between the two beds. Finally, Vernon yelled his wife's name loudly and he was gone. "He knew that he might get killed," Ellie remembers, "and he was willing to take the risk." Some of Vernon's last words remain etched on his tombstone. "If you don't vote, you don't count." Ellie Dahmer would go onto serve as an election commissioner in Hattiesburg.



Charred remains of Vernon Dahmer's car the morning his house and store in the Kelly Settlement of Hattiesburg, Miss., were firebombed on Jan. 10, 1966. *The Hattiesburg American* reported that "the vehicle bore marks of a shooting."

[Moncrief Photograph Collection, ID #513, Mississippi Department of Archives & History](#)

All of this brings us to our gospel lesson this morning. Matthew, chapter 5 – also known as the beatitudes. Nowhere in this lesson “is advice being offered for getting along in this world, where mercy is more likely to be regarded as a sign of weakness than to be rewarded in kind.”<sup>6</sup> “Matthew’s beatitudes are not practical advice for successful living, but prophetic declarations made on the conviction of the coming-and-already-present kingdom of God.”<sup>7</sup>

Finally, Peter Marty has written, “Practice the beatitudes of Jesus and you’ll never be tempted to bully... Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Weak and vulnerable people need our embrace, not our mockery. Let’s welcome the stranger, build bridges of hospitality, and cherish grace. Remember that once you speak a word, it’s impossible to unspeak it. Resist fear. Insist on extending hope to others. Never view yourself as above forgiveness.”<sup>8</sup> May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Matthew, The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary Volume VIII*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 1995), 179.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>8</sup> Peter W. Marty, “From the Publisher,” *Christian Century*, December 7, 2016, 3.