

CROOKED STICKS IN GOD'S HANDS MARK14:27-31; 1 COR 1:26-31

I like to use these verses together for a couple of reasons. First Mark gives the Biblical reason for why Preachers love fried chicken. It is a Biblical reason that more than justifies the reason we crave fried chicken. Ever since that rooster told on Simon Peter we have been trying to get even ever since by eating chicken out of existence. So far they keep producing far more than we preachers can keep up with but we keep trying. Secondly this verse in Corinthians explains why he chooses people like me and others who are weak and lowly to do His work. I am sure you have thought the same thing. There is an old saying that "God can draw a straight line with a crooked stick." In fact Martin Luther is credited with that saying. In other words God doesn't have to wait for us to be perfect before putting us to work. The Lord can draw a straight line with a crooked stick. Both scripture and experience bear witness to the graceful truth of that.

Just look in the Bible at those whom God used like Moses and King David. Moses was dodging a murder charge when God called him to lead the children of Israel out of slavery. And what Moses did to that Egyptian in the heat of the moment was not nearly so bad as what King David did to Uriah in cold premeditated murder. David arranged for Uriah, a loyal officer in his army, to be killed in action in order to cover up David's adulterous affair with Uriah's wife Bathsheba. Moses and David – crooked sticks the both of them – but God used them anyway.

Two of the most powerful expressions of this "crooked sticks in God's hands" appear in the Old Testament and Gospels.

In the Old Testament some brothers got a belly full of their smart-aleck younger brother Joseph, so the sons of Jacob devised a plan to get rid of him. They trussed him up like a deer on a stick and were planning to kill him, when their consciences got the better of them. Instead of killing Joseph, his brothers sold him into slavery, and then told their Daddy he'd been eaten by a wild animal. (And you thought the sibling rivalry in your family was bad.)

Joseph ends up a slave in the household of Pharaoh. His talent for interpreting dreams wins him the trust of the Pharaoh, and eventually he becomes, the Scripture says, "like a father to Pharaoh," and the king's right hand man. Many years pass, and one day Joseph's brothers show up at Pharaoh's court in the middle of a long famine, hoping to buy grain from Pharaoh's ample stores.

Of course his brothers don't recognize Joseph, sitting up there on the grand throne, dressed like an Egyptian, and wearing all that heavy eye shadow. Joseph lets them dangle on the end of his stick for a while, but it's not long before he can't stand it any longer. He sends all his servants out of the room, comes down off his throne, and says. "I am Joseph. Is Daddy still alive?"

It takes a few minutes for the brothers to believe him, and when the jig is up they think they are going to get payback in spades. But payback is the last thing on Joseph's mind. "Go home," he tells them. "Bring back Daddy and all the kinfolks. And don't worry about that little matter of selling your own flesh and blood into slavery. God sent me before you to preserve life . . . You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." (Gen. 45: 5; 50:20).

The Biblical writers are realists. Given the fact that all of us are sinners, God hasn't got anybody else to work with including you and me. He only has crooked sticks such as Moses and David, and the brothers of Joseph, and again you, and me. If God couldn't bring good results out of evil intentions, if God couldn't start with where we are, and lead us further than we can see at the moment, if God couldn't twist good news out of bad, he wouldn't be God, and you and I, and the whole of humanity would be, in every sense of the word, lost.

That's good news, but it's often hard to hear, especially in the middle of a crooked situation that has been crooked for years – even centuries. Joseph, the obnoxious youngest sibling, was the last person his brothers would have expected to personify God's prevenient grace, and Peter in today's Gospel story is the last person we would expect Jesus to use to head up the early church. Loud mouth Peter, always answering for the group whenever Jesus would ask a question does not seem to be the kind of preacher/ leader God wants to head up the birthing of the early church.

Look how Jesus starts off this section. "You will ALL fall away." Frame those words in your mind. We all have and perhaps will fall away at some point. I think it must have gone right over their heads. I like to say, "shoot lower sheriff, they are riding Shetlands." It appears Jesus is firing over their heads when he says, "you will all fall away." At that point I would have been shouting, now wait just a doggone minute Jesus. Of course Peter answers when he finally realizes Jesus is talking about him and then the rest of the disciples just rubber stamp what Peter said. No way will they abandon Jesus and Peter likes to ad, if every body else does, I WILL NOT! It is called "putus footus in mouthus" disease.

In Corinthians it is much the same. God did not choose any of us to serve Him because we were wise in the eyes of the world or influential or of noble birth. God chose the foolish to confound the wise and he chose the weak to show up the strong. I remember a lady in my first church where I was an associate pastor. She was a fine Christian, well to do and influential. Early in my beginnings there she said, "Well I hear you have an MBA. I am glad because it is not like you joined the ministry because you could not do anything else." Did you hear her basic belief. The only reason people join the ministry is because they are not capable of doing anything else. How offensive that could be. I am on the CPM and I can tell you we are the gate keepers for anyone who feels called to the ministry. Inquirers have to take a battery of psychological exams, write extensively about their Christian experience and their sense of call. Church Sessions have to endorse an enquirer, We just had an inquirer whose Session would not endorse them until a year later because in the first interview the person was unable to articulate their faith and their calling. After a year at seminary and personally growing a lot, the Session endorsed them and then we met with them, saw their course grades, their psyche evaluation and their on written report about their salvation and calling. Then we allowed the person to start the first phase on the process. One person's transcript from the University of Georgia showed where they had taken the language Swahili and made an A. We were impressed until they told us that there were a lot of football players in the class. He even tested a bit high toward addictive behavior. We admitted him. Why? What is the point? In God's hands crooked sticks can draw straight lines. They were not all wise, influential or of noble birth.

Have you never felt pulled in a thousand directions at once? Have you never felt as though you

never have a moment's peace? Have you never felt like hopping in your car and driving all the way to Tyre and Sidon to stay in a motel under an assumed name? Sure life is hard but God is greater. So what we are crooked sticks? We are the kind of people God likes to use.

I am sure you have noticed by now that I like to quote Scripture when I serve the elders at Communion. Usually the last one I quote is Romans 6:1-2, "What shall we then say. Shall we continue in sin so that grace may abound? May it never be. How can we who have died to sin still live in it?" The best commentator on Romans I have found is Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. He was an MD, left medicine and became the minister of a Welsh Presbyterian Church in Aberavon, South Wales. Then went on and became minister of the famous Westminster Chapel in London for 30 years, retiring in 1968. He wrote 8 volumes on Romans chapters 1-8. That Scripture which I quote is defined by Martin Lloyd-Jones as a major emphasis on our uniqueness, our special position, we "being what we are." And what are we? Not many wise, influential or of noble birth, but we are in Christ something special..

Matthew confirms this great truth about crooked sticks when you read the prologue to his Gospel, which is a very long, rather boring account of Jesus' personal genealogy. You will find in that long list of Jesus' male ancestors the names of three Canaanite women:

Tamar who disguised herself as a prostitute in order to claim her rightful inheritance,

Rahab, who really was a prostitute and a cunning secret agent for General Joshua, and

Ruth, the woman who taught the whole nation of Israel what it means to be faithful.

In other words, Jesus himself had some Canaanite blood in his veins, which suggests that reaching out to foreigners, weak and humble types, might not be such a stretch for the Messiah after all. **We all will fail.** We are free to think, to love and to obey. The downside is we make wrong choices and can make them for so long that we can end up in a self-made prison of consequences of our own choosing which can keep us in bondage where we think we cannot escape. God then becomes gracious beyond any measure. Isaiah wrote in 61:1-3: "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, Because the LORD has anointed me To bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners; To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD and the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn, To grant those who mourn in Zion, Giving them a garland instead of ashes, The oil of gladness instead of mourning, The mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting. So they will be called oaks of righteousness, The planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified."

Do you realize that these are the exact verses Jesus read in the synagogue on the Sabbath when He was handed the Hebrew Bible and turned to this passage and read it (Luke 4:16-21) and then said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Take note of the key words; afflicted, brokenhearted, captives, those who mourn, those who have ashes, and you could add not wise, not influential and not of noble birth. Like Jesus said, "You will all fall away."

Despite our crooked lives, out of our crooked histories, through our crooked witness, God works for good. Gods saves. God heals. God brings to life what was dead.

This, beloved, is good news, not just for some, but for everyone.