

God's Wisdom – the Foolishness of the Cross©

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

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It's absurd if you think about it. Absolutely ludicrous. In fact, it's rather hilarious. Can I hear you laugh at the hilarious foolishness of this claim we are hearing from Paul? Come on, give me a loud laugh. Laugh like a maniac. Laugh like you've just heard the most outlandish story ever.

Laugh. Laugh loud and a lot.

Why are we laughing? What's so funny, anyway?

Well, think about it. In Paul's culture the cross was a symbol of everything – I mean everything – that was horrid. It was used as capital punishment for rebels, renegades, criminals. It was despicable. It was pure shame. It was offensive – a stumbling block to many religious people.

The cross of Christ was a scandal. *Skandalon* is the word in Greek. The cross becomes an obstacle to faith – the cause of falling and destruction for some.

The cross is *skandalon* because it challenges all rival values. In the cross we see weakness – a person who has been put there to die. A person – as Jesus was – who is beaten, who is bleeding, who has no control over what is going to happen. Total weakness. Complete loss of freedom.

It's foolish to think that there is any power in that. Right?

In Paul's day, wisdom and eloquent speakers, that was power. Power was status. If you were a great educated speaker – people would compliment you, they would lift you up high on a pedestal.

They would feed you with praise and then you would go even higher and your status and power were even greater. That was wisdom. That was power.

And really, it's not much different today, is it? We put high value on education and people who are able to speak well. People who have some esteem, some proven wisdom.

Is there anything wrong with being well educated? Of course not. That isn't what Paul is saying. But what Paul is claiming is kind of weird. It makes no sense to people who can't accept it or believe it.

This is back to the basics with our theology of salvation. This is all about what Jesus accomplished for us by being willing to be weak and vulnerable; by allowing himself to be nailed to a cross.

This is about the pain and blood and death of the Son of God who came to save sinners; who in his weakness on the cross shows God's power to overcome death and to give life that is transformed into a life of faith and mercy and grace.

Paul says that God's weakness is stronger than any human strength. When we see Christ on the cross, suffering and dying, we see weakness and yet there is great strength in the power of what God is accomplishing in Jesus Christ – as weak as it appears.

There is simply no human wisdom – no human strength or ability that can provide salvation – forgiveness of sins, redemption from being lost in hopelessness. There is no way we smart, strong, eloquent people could do what God did for us in Jesus on the cross.

Yet people in Paul's day could not accept it. Would not believe it. The Jews waited and waited for the promised Messiah and many of them had high hopes that Jesus was the one they had waited for. Many believed he was that Messiah – until they could not believe any longer.

The Messiah (Christ) they wanted, the Christ they expected was one who would certainly save them. But they expected salvation from the Roman government; salvation from the oppression of enemies. The Messiah they wanted would be strong and mighty. He would not – could not, end up on a cross of shame, being crucified like a criminal.

Their Messiah would lead a powerful army and conquer the enemy. And the dream of a strong nation of Israel being established again would become a reality. It would be all about the Jewish people. Others would be put in their place. And life would finally be as it should be. As God planned it to be.

For the Jewish people to believe that death on a despicable cross would do anything but cause ridicule was just beyond their capacity to understand.

These were people whom the 10 commandments had been handed to them straight from the mighty hand of God. These were people who followed the rules, who had all sorts of rituals and practices in order to be holy, who routinely gave blood sacrifices on the alter in order to be forgiven of sins; in order to have atonement for their wrongs against God.

To see their hopes in Jesus being nailed to a criminals cross and lifted up for all to see and shame ... that was too much of a stumbling block for many of them.

God's plan for salvation was foolishness to them.

And for the Gentiles – those who were non-Jews, who worshipped many gods, who put high value on art and learning; on study and speech.

The message of the cross was too simple, too rustic, too backward. Too much of a scandal. It was unbelievable to many. They could not grasp it.

Paul says: “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 ... God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”

When it comes right down to it, we see pure grace in the cross. We hear about God’s plan to save the world – not as the Jews had hoped in conquering the Romans and those who oppressed them; not to raise them up to some high status in life – but to save all humanity from the grip of sin and death.

It is pure grace because the rules and rituals could not save us. The knowledge and wisdom and status in society – couldn’t do it either.

The smartest, holiest person on earth could not save God’s people from their sin.

It is only in the power of God that we can have salvation. By salvation I’m talking about the good news. It’s what we hear in the gospel of John, the third chapter Jesus says to Nicodemus “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

We are saved from something much more serious than earthly enemies who may have us conquered for a time. We are being saved from the pits of hell – that place where we would be separated from God forever because of our unrighteousness – because of our sin.

In Jesus crucified on the cross, our sins are crucified with him. Why? Because he chose to bear them for us. Because God chose to use Jesus, His only Son, this way – to provide for all who would believe – a free gift of grace and forgiveness. That is how we are saved. Salvation from our own destruction.

And another thing we see in this amazing weak way of salvation is that in Jesus’ death, the power of God shook the foundations of the earth as he raised Jesus up from death to life. It is in the resurrection of Christ that we now not only have forgiveness but also the promise of our own resurrection; of our own life eternal.

But you may say, the Bible tells us that in Christ we are all equal now. And it’s true. But Paul is saying that God provides this way that looks like foolishness to those who choose not to believe. That doesn’t mean there won’t be a day when they will make a new decision.

In all the gospels we hear this same message – God chooses what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chooses what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chooses what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, - so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’

In other words, we cannot brag on our own wise eloquent, perfectly holy ways as the way of salvation. It is not us, but God who saves us.

In our present day we have this same problem. Because we are so enlightened; we are so smart and have solid data with science, perhaps it is even more difficult for people to believe this foolish claim of salvation and eternal life given to us through Christ on cross. It looks like foolishness to many. There are those who laugh hysterically at our belief. They claim it is ancient and uninformed nonsense.

Yet the story of faith – the good news story of grace is the same old story. Those of us who are believers know it is true. How? We have experienced it through the faith the Holy Spirit grows in us. We experience it in our lives and through the lives of other believers – through the stories and witness of the saints who have gone before us.

And it is still today, just as important for us to reach out and share that good news to those around us, those who are hungry to know that there is something more than the meaningless wisdom of the world.

This year my challenge to us as a church is that we put our minds and hearts to reaching out to those who are in our community, in our neighborhood, in the world that we might show them the power of the cross and, with God's help, lead them to the place of joy and faith in Jesus Christ - joy that we have in him.

God's wisdom is in the foolishness of the cross. Thanks be to God! For His ways are not our ways. Amen.

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