

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

19 For it is written,
 “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
 and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 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.

22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

26 Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

A PICTURE FROM THE PAST

This past week my cousin Isaac sent me a picture that his mother took of Isaac, my brother Brad, and myself. I was about 10, my brother was about 4, and I guess Isaac was about 7 or 8.

Isaac was a big train buff so we were in front of some train tracks with the beautiful East River Mountain in the background. Isaac’s mom thought this would be a wonderful spot to take a picture of these three beautiful children.

But, we had another idea.

We didn’t want to take pictures so we decided that when the picture was snapped, we would make the goofiest faces possible. We did a great job! We stood on one leg, closed our eyes and did our best to mess up the picture.

It was great fun for us but not so much for Isaac's mom.

(It reminds me of that commercial where a mother wants to take a picture of her family. But, none of the family cooperates. The little girl is texting. The husband is looking at the ball game. The little boy is making faces.

But, this mom is able to change the photograph digitally with her new software and produce a good family photograph. She was able to get the family she wanted instead of the family nature gave her!)

Unfortunately, my aunt took pictures before such things were possible.

Many, many years later Isaac ran across this picture at his mom's house. He scanned it and sent me a digital copy. He wrote, "Have you ever seen three more awkward looking children?"

I must admit that he was right. We were the most painfully awkward looking children that I have ever seen in my life. If only we had known that this picture would come back to haunt us, maybe we would have tried to look more presentable!

I wrote my cousin back and said, "It's hard to believe that these awkward looking children grew up to be the sophisticated, good looking adults that we are today!"

I was joking of course. In some ways I am still that awkward little boy. I can cover it up most of the time, but as my wife likes to say, "You can take the boy out of the hills but you can't take the hill out of the boy."

I just hate it when she's right.

So what, pray tell does all this have to do with our Scripture for today?

BACK TO THE CORINTHIANS

I'll get to that a little later. Right now let's review what we know about the Corinthian church.

The Corinthian church, as we learned last week was deeply divided. They were divided over leadership.

Some claimed to follow the great preacher, Apollos. Some claimed to follow the great theologian, Paul. Some claimed to follow Peter, that "rock" on which the church would be built.

Some said smugly, "You guys can argue about that all you want. I know I'm a real born again Christian. I follow Christ. I know I'm going to heaven. Too bad about you."

Does that sound familiar? It should. We have similar arguments about leadership in the church today. We have people boasting about their faith.

BOASTING AND THE CROSS

Unfortunately, as Paul points out, boasting about our faith is not possible. The central symbol of the Christian faith is the cross.

How can we boast about our abilities and accomplishments when the central symbol of the Christian faith speaks of forgiveness, service and self-giving love?

The cross is the absolute antithesis of boasting. And the cross runs contrary to the ways of the world.

We always want to claim that we're the best in every way. What do we say? Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing. And so we still boast about our family, our country and even our faith.

What can we do to gain a different perspective? The cross still looks like foolishness to the world, and no matter how hard we try to be different we are still greatly influenced by the world. How can we learn that this answer, which seems "foolish" from the world's perspective, is indeed the message of salvation?

CHRISTIANS ARE NOT COOL

Paul tells us that the first thing we need to do is recognize the problem. Christians are painfully different from the rest of the world. In that regard we look like awkward, unsophisticated children to those outside the faith. We look foolish.

I don't know about you, but I try to avoid looking awkward whenever possible. I don't want to look foolish. I want to look cool.

Christianity Today even had a feature article about the newest trend in youth work, trying to make Christianity look cool. It had that famous picture of Jesus knocking on the door, but in this picture Jesus has shades on and is giving that cool I'm above it all look as he peaked over the rim of his glasses.

"Hey, cool Jesus here ... knocking at the door of your heart."

This is nothing new. We've been trying to make Jesus look cool for a long time. I remember leading a youth group in which we sang, "Jesus is just all right with me. Jesus is just all right with me."

Yeah, we were cool. We were Jesus freaks.

We were not cool, and our attempts to look cool made us appear all the more awkward. Today we have rock and roll music in the church and Christian rock concerts. Some of it even sounds like heavy metal. They say the words are Christian but who can tell?

I don't mind. I'm all for Night of Joy and Rock the Universe. If our kids can have fun and sing about Jesus at high decibel levels, I'm all for it. It's better than what my generation used to sing about.

But, it's not cool because Jesus is not cool ... at least from the world's perspective. He never has been, and he never will be.

THE CROSS IS STILL A CROSS

Paul says it over and over again in our lesson for today. The message of Christianity is absolutely crazy to Jews and Gentiles alike.

From their perspective a real savior wouldn't do a crazy thing like dying for the world. From their perspective a real savior would do the smart thing like not dying and getting rid of his enemies.

And down through the years people have tried to modify the Christian message to make it fit in with this worldly perspective. They have tried to make Jesus cool.

The Crusaders put a cross on their shields. They thought that surely Jesus would be on their side as they attacked those Muslim infidels.

The cross has been used as a fashion statement in jewelry and tattoos. Crosses have been burned to support prejudice and terror.

But, Paul tells us, try as we might we can't change the message. A cross is still a cross. A cross is still an instrument of torture. It is not a symbol of power in any way.

The cross is a symbol of what the world will do to those who dare to follow the way of Jesus.

Not only is it un-cool to follow Jesus. It is also dangerous!

And so, I guess the real question is this:

"Why would anyone in their right mind want to follow Jesus?" It doesn't "pay" in terms of money, power or fame.

(By the way, those folks who preach a prosperity theology are nuts. There is nothing in the Bible that suggests our bottom line will improve when we follow Jesus. You can quote me on that.)

So, why do it?
What's in it for us?

NOT ABOUT US

That's the wrong question. It's not about us. It's about God and God's glory. It's about God's call to service.

This might be the most countercultural part of the gospel. If there is one thing that many modern philosophies and religions agree upon it is this, "It's all about me. I am my own god. I get to decide."

If that's what you believe, then Christianity will seem like one wild and crazy religion! Christianity is about the call that comes from above and beyond us. Christianity is about leaving everything and following Jesus.

And it doesn't seem to matter who we are or where we are. Jesus calls the rich and the poor to come follow him. Jesus calls the smart and the not so smart to come follow him. Jesus calls the religious and the irreligious to come follow him.

We are called not because of who we are and what we have done. We are called because God for His own good reasons has decided to call us. We don't know why God calls us, but in this particular passage Paul gives us a clue why God calls many of us.

REMEMBER YOUR CALL

Paul told the Corinthians that when it came to their faith they should remember their call. They should remember what their life was like when Jesus called them to come and follow. Paul wrote,

"Do you remember when you became a Christian? When Jesus called you, most of you weren't the best and brightest. In fact many of you were a bit slow to catch on. Not many of you had a good job. You weren't listed in Who's Who. Most of you weren't important people."

So why did Jesus call people like this?

Paul suggests that maybe God did it as a kind of demonstration of the power of the gospel.

In His choice of those foolish Corinthians God was demonstrating that the message didn't need to be proclaimed by the wise and the well heeled. God's message didn't depend upon the human messenger.

By and large God chose the weak and the foolish to proclaim the gospel so that no one could boast in the presence of God.

To put another way, God called us so that people can look at us and say, "Wow, if God can save him, God can save anybody!"

This is where my opening illustration comes into play. Paul is holding up a picture of what the Corinthians looked like when they became Christians.

And the picture is not very flattering. They were certainly awkward underachieving children when Christ came into their lives. But, that didn't make any difference. The power of the gospel was greater than their shortcomings.

Sometimes I wonder if it might be appropriate for me as a Christian leader not to put any certificates of achievement on the wall. Instead of proudly displaying my degrees and certifications maybe I should replace all those trophies with a neatly framed picture of three, silly awkward looking children.

And when anyone asked I could say,

"You see the skinny one on the right with the snazzy multi-colored shorts? That's me. That's what I was like when God called me. They say that God works in mysterious ways. I guess that proves it."

NEW OFFICERS

We're going to ordain and install new officers today. Quite often when we ask people to become officers they protest. They say,

"I'm not worthy. I don't have enough experience. There are others who could do a better job."

I think that in most cases they are being too modest, or maybe they're trying to get out of the responsibility of being an officer in the church!

But, in one sense they're right. They aren't worthy of the task. They do come up short when it comes to being a leader in the church.

The Bible tells us that all of us come up short, short of God's glory and short of what God has meant us to be.

And that's what makes us perfect for the job. Jesus calls us to be His followers not because we are cool or smart or influential or wealthy. Jesus calls us to be his followers because God's power is made perfect in weakness.

We qualify for that call in spades!

OUR CALL

When I listen to the testimony of people who have become believers as an adult, I never hear anyone say that they became a believer because it was good for business or that it was a good way to meet people.

No, they quite often talk about what was wrong in their life.

Maybe they were having family problems. Maybe they were abusing alcohol or drugs. Maybe they had a serious medical issue.

Maybe that had everything and yet it seemed like there was a big hole in their life.

And they all seem to say that God called them to faith through their need. Their weakness was the occasion for a new found faith.

Others grew up in the faith and can't remember a time that they didn't believe. But, they too have their call stories, a time when faith became more real and vital to them.

Perhaps it was when they went away to college and found a much-needed mentor and friend on campus. Perhaps it was when some tragedy occurred in their life, and they found unexpected strength and grace.

The point is this. The power of the gospel became evident in a time of weakness. Amazing grace changed everything.

I think today's lesson is just another way of saying what Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians. Many of you know it by heart.

Paul wrote, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

CROSSING THE FINISH LINE

The Olympics are filled with stories of triumph and tragedy. Most of the time there is a clear distinction between the two. But, one year the distinction was not so clear in the 400-meter race.

At the start of the race Englishman, Derek Redmond popped his right hamstring.

Most runners would merely quit when experiencing an excruciating injury such as this. But, Derek wanted to compete in the race so much that he got up and started hopping toward the finish line.

All the other runners had finished the race in seconds, but Redmond in tears slowly and laboriously kept hopping. It looked as if he would fall at any moment.

Suddenly a man appeared beside Derek. His father had run down from the stands and pushed his way through the security guards to reach his son.

Redmond's father put his arm around his son and let him cry on his shoulder for a second. Then with his father holding him up, Derek hobbled to the finish line and finished the race.

I think that what happened that day could be seen as a kind of parable of how the cross brings us salvation. We do not cross the finish line because of our wisdom or good works or abilities.

In the final analysis we are saved because we have a heavenly Father who, through his son Jesus was willing to come down out of the stands and carry us over the finish line.

Those who have been carried over the finish line know the power of the cross.

Once again the hymn summarizes it well.

"When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of Glory died. My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.
Love so amazing, so divine demands my soul, my life, my all."

Remember your call.

Long ago God graciously reached out to foolish, awkward and obstinate people like you and me.

And in the end grace was the victor.

Amen.