

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

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.

Our Scripture lesson for today is a portion of the first letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church at Corinth, thus the title, 1 Corinthians. I know. Most of you know that already. But, I say that because I want you to remember above all else that today we are reading someone else’s mail!

And so, I would suggest that before we can understand anything about this letter we have to read it in context. We have to understand the people to whom the letter was written, the Corinthians, and we have to learn a bit about the person who wrote the letter, the Apostle Paul.

## CORINTH

Corinth was the big city of the ancient world. It was a place of great cultural and economic diversity. Think New York City if you want a modern day example.

Corinth was located on a narrow isthmus between two seaports. And it literally was the crossroads of the world. It was a place where many languages were spoken, new ideas were explored, and exotic goods were traded.

Corinth was also a place filled with injustice, corruption and vice.

There was a great disparity between the rich and poor. Fortunes were made in Corinth, and many lives were sacrificed in the process. Like many places today they played by the golden rule in Corinth. He who has the gold makes the rules. In this bustling ancient town success was seen as the highest good. How you got that success was not so important.

In Corinth prostitution was rampant. Prostitution even played a role in many religions. In fact if you wanted to say someone was wild and undisciplined in the ancient world you called that person a “Corinthian”.

## PAUL

And into this bustling city came the Apostle Paul, a Jew, and a foreigner who was not a very good speaker. Just before coming to Corinth Paul had been soundly rejected by the cultured people in Athens. Luke tells us in the book of Acts (Acts 17:32-34) that his preaching harvested more sneers than souls.

In Corinth eloquence and worldly wisdom counted for more than faith and conviction. Given what had happened to Paul in Athens things did not look promising as the Apostle began his ministry in this ancient metropolis.

But, sometimes God makes a way where there seems to be no way. Once again the Apostle learned that the success of the gospel does not rely upon fancy preaching or persuasive arguments.

The power of the Spirit enabled Paul to be successful in Corinth, and Paul vowed from this day forward to trust in God’s power instead of his own ability. He would preach the unadorned gospel, the message of the cross and the resurrection, and let the chips fall where they may. (See 1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half. And when the Apostle left for Ephesus he left behind a collection of believers that were as diverse as the city itself. Rich and poor, Gentile and Jew, male and female were all enjoying a single fellowship of the Spirit. Former prostitutes and devotees to the mystery religions worshipped together and embraced a new way of life.

How could this happen? How could a faith based upon sacrifice and reliance upon the power of God’s love find such favor in a culture devoted to pleasure and power? Truly the church at Corinth was a miracle.

But, Paul worried about this new community of faith. Their beliefs stood in marked contrast to the dominant culture, and there would be constant pressure for them to make their Christian faith a bit more compatible with the world in which they lived.

## THE CULTURAL INVASION

Unfortunately, Paul’s worries were well founded.

Not long after Paul left the beliefs of Corinthian culture began to seep back into the church. Instead of preaching the gospel that Paul had taught them for the past year and a half, new leaders arose who began to teach a different version of the gospel, a version of the gospel that was more in line with what everyone else in society already believed.

And this proved to be devastating to the life of this fledgling congregation. Christians in Corinth began committing immoral acts. They sued each other and refused to eat together at the Lord's Supper.

They had arguments over worship style and leadership. Some claimed to have learned a deeper, secret truth about God that sounded a lot more like their old mystery religions than the Christian faith. And some of these "intellectuals" even suggested that the resurrection was not true.

Paul responded to this terrible situation with a letter. We take it apart and study each section in great detail. This letter, more than most, has proved to be quite helpful in understanding the basics of the Christian faith.

But, I think it is important for us to remember that originally the Corinthian correspondence was a kind of laundry list of infractions against the gospel. And the list goes on and on for fifteen chapters.

(By the way, Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, as we noted a few weeks ago is even more negative in tone. Not only does the church at Corinth reject Paul's correction in the first letter; things even get worse!)

Today's lesson presents us with an important question. What can we do when the values of the world invade the church? What can we do when Christians stray from basic beliefs and embrace behavior that is even immoral?

Do we reject them? Do we say that they are no longer "real" Christians? Do we form a new denomination?

This was not what Paul did with the Corinthians.

### THE FOOLISH CROSS

Paul took them back to the basics. Paul had them look to the cross of Christ. He reminded them of what it meant to be baptized. It means that we die to the old way of life and embrace a new way of life. It means that that we take up a cross and follow Jesus.

Now Paul realized that he was swimming against the tide in Corinth. He acknowledges in our passage for today that for the Greeks the cross of Christ is sheer folly. Not much has changed in that regard either.

Today the political satirist, Bill Mahr, takes that approach. He doesn't make an argument against Christianity. He just states the basic beliefs of the Christian faith in a very unsympathetic way and says, "Who in their right mind would believe something like that? It's crazy."

And the cultured elite chortle and act as if Bill has discovered something new. Bill Mahr is a modern day Corinthian. And there are many like him.

Many in our culture do not believe in God or at least they do not believe in the God revealed in Jesus. God for them is by definition a God who is powerful. God is above and beyond us. It makes no sense to believe that God could become a human being and live among us.

How could God humble himself in that way? The cross is still foolishness and a stumbling block many cultured despisers in our society.

And yet it is this so called “foolishness” that is the very wisdom of God. It is the cross that defines the community of faith. It is the cross that teaches us a wisdom that is contra intuitive. It is a wisdom that comes not from this world but from divine revelation.

God does not overcome the world by embracing strength. God overcomes the world by embracing weakness, even death on a cross.

In the kingdom of God true power is found in humility and grace. Just as Jesus embraced humility and sacrifice on the cross, so his followers are to embrace humility and sacrifice in their way of life. (See Philippians 2:1-8)

#### THE WRONG KIND OF MESSIAH

This passage tells us that the Jews also had a different reason to reject the cross.

We’ve discussed their objections many times. Suffice it to say that the Jews rejected Jesus for religious reasons.

They thought (and they had some scriptural support for this) that the Messiah was going to be warrior king. The Messiah would ride into town on a white horse (not a donkey), and he would crush the enemies of Israel.

The idea that Jesus was the Messiah seemed crazy to the Jews for theological reasons. Jesus didn’t fit the Messiah mold. Messiahs, according to this group, crucify their enemies and not the other way round.

Their Bible told them that if you hang on a tree you are cursed. (Deuteronomy 21:23)

To proclaim the cross as a means of hope and deliverance was not only foolish, it was blasphemy.

#### THE “CRAZY” GOSPEL

We who go to church all the time have heard these lessons so much that we fail to understand how what we believe sounds shocking to the world “out there.”

Kierkegaard once said,  
 “Christianity has taken a giant step into the absurd. Remove from Christianity its ability to shock and it is altogether destroyed. It then becomes a tiny superficial thing, capable of neither of inflicting deep wounds nor of healing them.”

Think of all the “crazy” things that we Christians believe. “Blessed are the meek. Love your enemies. Go, sell all you have and give it to the poor.” Try putting that into practice in the “real world” and see where it gets you.

The world thought the first Christians were drunk with new wine, and the ruler Festus thought Paul’s defense of the faith merited a court-ordered psychiatric examination.

The world measures things by what works, what is powerful and what is practical. By those standards, the Christians faith is as zany as strawberry pizza.

To those who think that the way of the cross is foolish and to those that think that the way of the cross lacks power I would say the same thing. You’re right. The cross was a lousy marketing tool in the first century. And the cross is a lousy marketing tool today.

Using any rational or religious measure of success the cross is a sign of ultimate failure. We don’t want our Messiah to do a dumb thing like getting crucified. We want our Messiah to come on the clouds of glory.

#### REMEMBER YOUR CALLING

But, think about what it means to be a Christian. Think about how we called to be Christians. We weren’t saved by reason. We weren’t saved by our wealth and power.

The cross and the resurrection saved us. We were saved by grace through faith.

And the Spirit of the living God convinced us of that truth. As the old hymn puts it, the grace of God taught our heart to fear and grace those fears relieved.

And we learned to live by that grace. It was a whole new world.

Our salvation is a miracle based upon the greatest miracle of all, the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is the power of God to those of us who are being saved. It is the height of foolishness to those who are perishing.

That’s the point Paul makes when he says that the so-called “foolishness” of God is wiser than the wisdom of the world, and the so-called “weakness” of God is stronger than the world’s strength.

You see the cross is not just a symbol of what some people did to Jesus way back when. The cross is a symbol of how we are to live here and now.

Paul said that he had been crucified with Christ. He had died to the old way of life in his baptism. And the life he now lived was due to the power of that symbolic crucifixion of the old way of life. God's salvation made him a new creature, a new creation. (See Galatians 2:19-20)

That's why in 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 Paul tells these proud and contentious Christians,

“Think about what you were like before you came to Christ. Not many of you were wealthy or wise. Not many of you were powerful. Not many of you had much status in society. These things didn't save you.

So, why are you worshipping these things now? Why are you letting the ways of the world creep into the community of faith? The way you treat each other is an indictment of your faith.”

If the Apostle Paul could write a letter to the church today, what do you think he might say? I would suspect that his letter would not be all that different from his letter to the Corinthians that was written so long ago. The squabbles that marked the Corinthian church sound suspiciously like the minutes of our last Presbytery meeting!

## LIFT HIGH THE CROSS

Just as they did in the past, the social and cultural values of our world have seeped into the body of Christ and have obscured the basics of what we believe. Instead of transforming the world by our commitment to the cross and resurrection, we have incorporated the values of the world into our belief system.

We have once again become more Corinthian than Christian.

We have let the world tell us what is foolish and what is wise. We have stumbled on cornerstone of our faith. Instead of lifting the cross high, we have hidden it behind the clutter of the world's values.

The Corinthian way continues to tempt us, but Lent offers us the opportunity to remember who we are and go in a different direction. Lent offers an opportunity to lift high the cross.

On the cross the world crucified the Son of God. On the cross we took the word made flesh and killed him in the worst way possible.

At the foot of the cross our words of so-called wisdom seem foolish.  
At the foot of the cross we see our sin most clearly.

We remember that like the disciples of old we too deny what we believe in most deeply and run away at the first sign of danger. At the cross we remember that even good religious people can do the worst things in the world in the name of God.

The cross helps us see our moral failures more clearly, and it also makes us consider our priorities. The cross forces us to ask, "What is most important in my life? What can I hold on to when everything else is taken away?"

Fred Craddock tells about one of his schoolmates who spent many years ministering in China. He was under house arrest and the soldiers came one day and told him that he could return to America. The family was celebrating.

The soldiers said, "You can take 200 pounds with you." They had been there for years! Two hundred pounds!

They got the scales and they started the family arguments—two children, wife, and husband. Must have this vase... Well, this is a new typewriter... What about my books? ... What about our toys? They weighed everything and took it off, weighed it and took it off, until at last they had it right on the dot: two hundred pounds.

The soldiers asked if they were ready to go and they said, "Yes." "Did you weigh everything?" They said, "Yes!" "Did you weigh the kids?" "No, we did not." "You will have to weigh the kids."

In the blink of an eye, typewriter, vase, books, all became trash.

What treasures might quickly become trash in the face of our own mortality? What treasures might we quickly throw away at the foot of the cross?

In the face of our own mortality human wisdom and achievement look foolish. Power and material possessions are of no value. What hope do we have?

Paul suggests that we look to the cross. The empty cross represents hope that transcends even death. The empty cross represents not only the death of Jesus but also the promise that death will not have the final word with Jesus or with us.

Those Corinthians still try to beguile us and convince us of their worldly wisdom. But Lent offers us the opportunity to look in a different direction.

Lent gives us the opportunity to reassess what is important. Lent gives us the opportunity to lift high the cross of Christ and learn the "foolish" wisdom that leads to life eternal. Amen.