

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

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 STUMBLING BLOCK

When I was a child we used to sing a rousing gospel song. We cheerfully proclaimed with gusto, “There is power, power wonderworking power in the blood of the Lamb.” In other words, we were joyfully singing about the sacrifice of the cross.

But, one night after we sang that song the pastor described the process of crucifixion in graphic detail. It was sort of a homiletic version of Mel Gibson’s movie, *The Passion of the Christ*”.

I was horrified and repulsed by what I heard. How could we sing such a cheerful hymn about such a terrible event? It didn't make sense.

The cross was a stumbling block to my young mind. It seemed worse than foolish. It seemed cruel and unnecessary.

When you read the story of Jesus in the gospels, you find that His disciples were of the same opinion. To the disciples the cross was unnecessary and quite frankly foolish. They were horrified that Jesus would talk about voluntarily taking up a cross.

The Messiah shouldn't be stupid thing like getting himself crucified. He should do the smart thing ... like taking over the country and getting rid of the Roman cross forever.

SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

There are many today who also find the cross to be a stumbling block. They find the beliefs of Christianity to be unacceptable mainly because of the message of the cross.

And so they have reinvented religion to make it more palatable to the modern mind.

Actually, they prefer not to speak of religion at all. They prefer to speak of "spirituality". The common phrase you hear is "I'm spiritual but not religious."

What does that mean?

This approach takes various forms, but there are some common themes. Tom Long talks about this trend in his book, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, and he lists four common beliefs.

First, this group believes that salvation comes through knowledge, knowledge that we can obtain on our own. This knowledge can take various forms, such as knowledge about proper diet or knowledge about the nature of the world or knowledge about how to be emotionally healthy.

But, no matter what form it takes knowledge is the means of salvation. Thinking the right thoughts in the right way is what saves us.

Second, the spiritual but not religious groups does not like any talk about the incarnation. The idea that God became a man and dwelt among us is a non-starter with those who think in this way. Faith cannot be too down to earth. It always needs to be somewhat vague and “otherworldly”. This is what they mean by spirituality. Spirituality is that which we cannot see or touch.

Third, there is a focus on the inner self. The divine spark from within is what really matters. To quote a line from Star Wars, “Feel the force, Luke. Feel the force.” That’s a parody, but you get the idea. This is a view of God that is prevalent in the modern world. God is found in all of us.

And finally, there is an emphasis upon present spiritual reality instead of a future hope. What matters most is that I am “spiritually aware” today. Thinking too much about the future hinders my ability to really be present here and now.

Now let me say that there is some truth in this approach. We need to value knowledge. We need to look inward and be aware of our true feelings. There is a mysterious element to faith that cannot be quantified.

But, where I disagree is the idea that we can attribute ultimate meaning and value to knowledge and self-awareness. To put it another way, knowledge and self-awareness cannot save us.

In the biblical book of Ecclesiastes the preacher talks about the vanity of trusting in knowledge. He wrote that no matter how much we learn one day we would forget it all. It all gets to be rather tiring.

To try and find salvation in wisdom is like chasing after the wind. In the face of our mortality, knowledge alone cannot bring us the peace we seek. (Ecclesiastes 1:16-18)

A FOOLISH STUMBLING BLOCK

So, what can bring us salvation?

Paul tells us that it is the message or the word of the cross.

The word translated “message” or “word” is the Greek word, “logos”. “Logos” is used in the gospel of John to describe divinity coming to earth in

Jesus. The word, the “logos” “became flesh and lived among us”. (John 1:14)

In our English translations of that verse Word is capitalized. Word is capitalized because “Logos” is about more than just a message. “Logos” is about the presence of God, the message of God revealed in Jesus.

That’s how the Jews and the Greeks understood “logos” as well.

When the Jews would use the word “logos” it would be in relation to God’s law. They would talk about the “message of the law”.

The Greeks would use the word “logos” in relation to philosophical knowledge. “Logos” described the divine reason behind the cosmic order.

But, when Paul talks about the “Logos” of the cross, it made no sense to the Jew or the Greek. The cross was illegal, unjust and an affront to reasonable people everywhere.

How could the cross be the “Logos”? How could the divine be made manifest in an event like this? How could God be in Jesus if Jesus was crucified?

It was foolish. It was crazy. It was unthinkable. It was bad enough to say that God was in Christ, that the Son of God abandoned heaven to be a part of our flesh and blood world.

But, to say that the Son of God humbled himself to point of being crucified was unacceptable. It was unacceptable then, and to many it is unacceptable now.

And yet the message of the cross stands at the heart of the Christian faith.

Today we take communion, and what do we say?
“This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you.”

What are we talking about? In the ancient world Christians were accused of being cannibals because of these words. Today Christians are accused of embracing ancient myths.

THE POWER OF THE CROSS

What can we say to these objections? How can we speak to the world about the cross?

In order to speak to the world about the cross we have to talk about what it means. The cross by itself is not a source of inspiration but a horrible example of human cruelty.

The cross did not inspire the disciples and followers of Jesus. It was the ultimate insult. The cross was a reason to run away and hide.

And yet after the *resurrection* the cross became a symbol not of hatred and shame, but a symbol of hope and new life. The horror of the cross became a symbol of forgiveness.

We cannot find the meaning of the cross just by dramatically retelling the story of the sacrifice of Jesus. All of these books and movies about the details of the crucifixion of Jesus in some ways actually distract us from the true meaning of the cross.

Nor is the cross is not some “magical” sacrifice that takes away our sin. The old gospel hymn had it wrong. No wonder I squirmed when I sang, “There is power, power *wonderworking* power in the blood of the Lamb.”

The cross is not about “wonderworking power,” a glib “get out of jail” free pass for sinners.

The message of the cross is more serious than that and more practical than that.

The power of the cross lies in the fact that it gives us a promise, and it requires something of us in return. The cross is a symbol of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and the cross symbolizes how we are to live as His disciples.

In my opinion the key passage in the Bible when it comes to interpreting the message of the cross is in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Paul was encouraging the church not to do anything out of selfish ambition or conceit. Instead, they were to embrace a life of humility and service.

And why would the Philippians want to live in this way? They would live in this way because they were following the example of Jesus. (Philippians 2:3-8)

Jesus was God in the flesh, but God's divinity was not revealed in a display of power. God's divinity was in a life of service to human beings. Jesus, the Son of God humbled himself. He lived among humans and even suffered death on a cross at the hands of the very people he had come to save.

But, when he died on the cross Jesus showed the true power of God. As he died Jesus sought forgiveness for those who crucified him. And when we look to the cross, we see the power of that humility and sacrifice.

We see that the way to salvation, the way to God is not putting others down or running over others. The way to salvation is the way of sacrificial service and forgiveness.

A MEANS OF GRACE

That's the reason we take communion on a regular basis.

The body broken and blood shed remind us that the Christian faith is founded on sacrifice and forgiveness. It began with Jesus who died for the sins of the world. But, it continues with us as we take up our cross and follow him.

Many in our world do not believe that the power of God can be found in service and sacrifice. Indeed many do not believe in God at all.

In such a society we need a way to remember the grace of God and be transformed by that grace. Communion does that. That's why we refer to communion as a means of grace.

The sacrifice of Jesus reminds us of our identity. We are a community founded on this sacrifice. And that means we are to live cruciform shaped lives. The cross guides our attitudes and actions. When we look to the cross, we remember that God in Christ has forgiven us.

We say it each week because we need to say it each week. "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven."

The power of God is not made manifest in lording it over us and judging us. The power of God is made manifest in becoming a part of the world that He made. The power of God is made manifest in the tears that He sheds for His people. The power of God is even made manifest by death on a cross.

And that costly sacrifice has a hold on us. There is power in the blood of the Lamb, but it is not a magical wonderworking power. It is the power of forgiveness and humble service.

THE CALL TO HUMBLE SERVICE

This was the point that the Corinthians had missed.

The Corinthian church was all about emphasizing the spectacular. They were the “church of what’s happening now”. They had the secret knowledge. Their pastor had written a book about the 7 keys to creating a dynamic and successful church.

They had the best preaching, the best teaching, the best theologians, the best location, and more spiritual gifts than you could “shake a stick at”.

But, there was one thing that they lacked, and that one thing was humility. And that, of course was what they really needed. The power of the church is the power of humility.

That’s why Paul was emphasizing the message of the cross. It’s hard to look at the cross and be puffed up with our own self-importance. The cross really does pour cold water on all our pride.

And Paul being Paul, he decided to add ice cubes to that cold water! Speaking about the lives of the Corinthians before they became Christians Paul said,

“Correct me if I’m wrong. But, when you were called to be Christians you were a pretty sorry lot. Most of you weren’t all that smart ... or powerful ... or of noble birth.

In fact you have to wonder why God called you at all.

I have an idea.

I think God called the weak, the lowly and the despised (in other words, people like you) in order to prove that salvation doesn't depend upon what we can do but upon what God can do. God called you so that people would say, 'Wow, if God can save people like that, then God can save anybody!'"

How's that for building up a congregation's sense of self-esteem?

Paul would have failed the practical ministry courses at seminary! But, sometimes shock therapy is necessary in order for us to understand that our "wisdom" is really not wisdom at all.

Over the years Christians have fought against this message. We have (over and over and over again) tried to change the church into something that it was not meant to be.

We have used the church as a way to bless the agenda of the state and fight wars in the name of God. We have used the church as a way to gain self-esteem and personal glory and even money.

But, the message of the cross continues to pour cold water on our pride and selfish ways. The message of the cross calls us back to the roots of our faith. And that's why each month we take communion.

When we take communion we remember once again. This didn't start with us. It's not all about us and what we want.

It's all about God and what God wants. It's about a life of humility and reconciliation based upon the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Broken One challenges us to deny ourselves, take up a cross and follow Him. And when we lose our life for his sake and for the sake of the gospel, we find it.

A SUCCESSFUL WASTE

A seminary professor was driving down the highway with a friend. He was talking about one of his students. He said,

“She had started a great career in banking, but then God called her into the pastoral ministry. She walked off the job, and came to seminary in response to that call.

She was really one of the finest students I ever taught. She’s now serving a little church near here. I can still remember the paper she wrote on the Trinity.

Not only was she very bright she also was someone with a very pleasing personality. We all loved her.”

The friend replied, “I would like to meet her. If her church is nearby, why don’t we drop by and see if she might be there.”

They took the next exit and drove three or four miles into the country. They found the little brick church at the end of a narrow road and pulled into the gravel parking lot. They sat for a while looking at the church.

The church had obviously seen better days. The sign out front was peeling and need of repair. And there on that sign was the name of the student the professor had remembered so fondly.

The church looked so forlorn, so remote and small. After a few moments had passed the professor’s friend said, “What a waste.”

But, the professor was not so sure.

He knew the One who had called his former student. And he knew that her ministry was based on her Savior’s life. She was merely following the One who died for sinners, “wasting” his life on the cross.

Do you sometimes feel like your life is a waste?
Do you feel isolated and alone and afraid?

I have a Word of salvation for you. It is the message of the cross.

God sent His Son into this broken world not to condemn it but to save it. His blood was shed for you. His body was broken for you. In Jesus Christ you are forgiven.

And out of gratitude for that salvation we get to join in the work of the kingdom. No place is too small or remote. No task is too menial. For in service to the least of these we discover the hope that is eternal.

That is the message of the cross.

Amen.