

**“The Word of the Cross: God’s Power and God’s Wisdom”**

**1 Corinthians 1:18-31**

**Fourth Sunday after Epiphany + January 29, 2023**

**Dear Friends in Christ,**

**What the world calls “foolish” God calls “wise” and vice versa. With God’s help, let us look at it from God’s perspective and leave behind true folly, even if the world thinks that folly is the wisest and most powerful thing in the world. First (1) let us leave behind the folly of visible signs, and second (2), let us leave behind the folly of human knowledge and wisdom.**

**--- I ---**

**First, let us take up the matter of signs. “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (vv.22-25). The Jewish people knew their history. They knew that God had acted in powerful and miraculous ways to rescue their nation from harm and danger. They knew that God had brought the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt through the Red Sea. They knew that God had fed them with manna from heaven and had given them water from the rock in the wilderness. They knew that many times the Lord had intervened in the military affairs of their nation and had given them stunning victories. When they thought of the Messiah, the Christ, they thought of victory parades and wealth and prosperity. They thought of Israel sitting on top of the world of nations. To believe in a Savior who died on a cross, cursed by God, this was foolishness to them. This was weakness, not strength. This was humiliation, not glory. The cross was a stumbling block to them.**

**Dear friends, it can be so with us. Many times our faith in God is just fine when things are going fine. When our job is going well and the kids are healthy, when we are getting along well with our spouse and we are able to meet our personal goals and pursue the things that we find important, then it is easy to give thanks to God. Yes, we know that God has blessed us; yes, we know that thanks and praise are due to Him. But what about when things are not going so**

fine? What about when we lose our job or someone in the family is diagnosed with a terrifying illness? What if our personal goals prove to be unattainable? What if there is tragedy and we lose people who are close to us? What if our spouse abandons us? It is easy then to forget God, to turn on Him, to trip over the stumbling block of signs. We would like to see something with our own eyes, some token of God's favor. We would like Him to answer a prayer favorably for our sick loved one or to lead us to a good job. Then we will put our trust in Him; then we can have something to boast about and in which to glory.

But the token of God's love in our life is not prosperity, it is not health or wealth or the attaining of our personal goals. The token of God's love is the cross of Jesus. "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:31-32). To see the sign of God's love for you, just look at the cross and open tomb.

Perhaps it will help to listen to someone who speaks for persecuted Christians. They, perhaps more than any other brother or sister in the faith, know the power of the cross. In his book, Revolution in World Missions, a Christian leader from southern India by the name of K.P. Yohannan pleads with Christians in prosperous and free nations to sacrifice something of their luxuries in order to send native evangelists to the unreached villages in Asia. He writes about Christians truly willing to take up a cross and give up everything for Christ and His Gospel: "The typical media testimony [in the United States] goes something like this: 'I was sick and broke, a total failure. Then I met Jesus. Now everything is fine; my business is booming, and I am a great success.'

"It sounds wonderful. Be a Christian and get that bigger house and a boat and vacation in the Holy Land.

"But if that were really God's way, it would put some Christians behind the Iron Curtain and in the Two-Thirds World in a pretty bad light. Their testimonies often go something like this:

**“I was happy. I had everything--prestige, recognition, a good job, and a happy wife and children. Then I gave my life to Jesus Christ. Now I am in Siberia, having lost my family, wealth, reputation, job and health.**

**“Here I live, lonely, deserted by friends. I cannot see the face of my wife and dear children. My crime is that I love Jesus” (p.97).**

**Leave behind the foolishness that seeks some other sign of God’s love besides the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for you.**

**--- II ---**

**Let us also leave behind the foolishness of the world’s knowledge and wisdom. “The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’ 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?” (vv.18-19).**

**What is an example today of the wisdom of the world? The world loves science and technology. Now, don’t get me wrong, science is a wonderful gift from God. It is the Creator who has put so many wonderful capabilities into the way the universe is ordered. There seems to be no end to the wonderful things that can be done with the elements and all the variety of living things in the universe. But many today do not see God behind all the wonders of creation. They do not recognize the mind of the Creator as the One who designed and ordered the world. Many today believe in rank materialism, the view that there is nothing that exists except matter. According to their view, there is no God, there are no spirits, no devils, no angels, and human beings do not have a soul that lives on after death. There is nothing except the material world. When you die, all that is you simply falls to the earth and decays. There is no afterlife, no heaven, no hell, no nothing except what you can see with your eyes or weigh on a scale or otherwise measure with human instruments.**

**The trouble is, none of these things can help you when you face death. Yes, medical advances may give you a few more years or even decades, but you will still face death, and to do so without trust in Christ the crucified would be utter foolishness. Just think: it pleases God to save people by the foolishness of what we preach! We proclaim Christ crucified, and people are saved. This is**

**what is so great about being in church work: God does all the work! I just get to be along for the ride and say what God has given us in His word, and His Spirit is here working, blessing, saving. Many would call this “the silliness of preaching.” And yet through it people are saved from eternal hell and brought into God’s eternal kingdom. It’s a joke God has on the world! He has the last laugh. They think they can accomplish something with all sorts of human ideas, but God, by means of the cross, shows all the wisdom of the world to be foolishness.**

**To the learned, the powerful, the movers and shakers of the day, the Christian preaching of a Savior who died a slave’s death on the cross was foolishness. (No wonder that many of the first Christians were themselves slaves.) Archaeologists have found some ancient crude graffiti in Rome that is unquestionably drawn in order to mock Christianity. There is a figure on a cross with the body of a man but the head of a donkey. A worshiper stands by and the inscription says, “Alexamenos worships [his] god” (A. Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50, Concordia Commentary*, 1996, p. 397). Apparently a student drew it to make fun of one of his classmates who was a Christian.**

**Still today many want nothing of the cross. Many think that they have no need for anyone to do anything for them. They will do the best they can, thank you, and forget about the need for a sacrifice to remove their guilt. They are able to fool themselves into thinking that if there is a God and there is an afterlife, surely they will be good enough to be accepted.**

**Maybe some have made fun of you for worshiping the Crucified. Some turn away from cross-focused churches and say, “I get tired of hearing the same thing every Sunday.” They tire of hearing what Jesus has done and have itching ears to hear all about what they can do to improve their own lives. The message of the cross says, “It’s not about you....It’s about Christ for you.” It is tempting to go after preachers who are entertaining, those who tell funny stories and have awesome skills at communication. But if they are not preaching the cross of Jesus, what good does it do? Leave behind the world’s foolish evaluation of the message of the cross. It is the power of God to save us.**

**A pastor gets into the pulpit and opens his mouth and flaps his jaws. Sounds come out. The world says, “How quaint that you country folk keep**

**alive the practice of gathering in an old building and listening to this old book and singing old songs. Surely this will die out at some point and be forgotten.” But God is there and souls are turned away from sin and to the eternal rescue that God is freely offering the population of the world. As Christ the crucified Savior is proclaimed, people from all nations are drawn to Him. Leave behind everything else, and cling to Christ crucified and raised from the dead, this message, the wisdom and power of God. Amen.**

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