

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

Rev. John F. Koerner

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. (1 Corinthians 1:18 N.R.S.V.)

The Foolishness of God

I am so excited about today's sermon. I know that you are just going to love it! Everybody's got problems, right? So you need to know some common sense ways to fix your problems. You need to know how to feel better, live healthier, how to lay hold of the things you need in order to live the good life. You need some encouragement, some conviction, some sure way to know that you can do what needs to be done. Yes?!

(Cell phone rings) Excuse me. (Answers phone) "Look. I'm in the middle of a sermon. Could you call back later?" . . . "It's who?" "God?" . . . "You want me to tell them what?" ". . .but God, I have this perfectly wonderful sermon here and . . ." ". . . but God, I don't want to sound foolish . . ." "Yes, Lord. Yes, Lord. You are the boss!"

Okay, just having a little bit of fun there, that wasn't really God on the phone. However, I do pray every week as I work on the sermon about what God wants you to hear. And I do struggle, because what God says to us in his word sometimes sounds kind of weak and foolish.

The Apostle Paul must have had the same problem with the congregation at First Corinth. There were a lot of movers and shakers in that old town. People there were convinced that they were the chief actors in history and if the world was going to be set right, it would be by their actions.

Something needed to be done about the injustices of the cruel Roman government. The government was totally out of control, heartless and evil. Something needed to be done about the bully boys in town and the loan sharks. So many people were hurting, and sick . . . so much sickness.

God's answer to all of that was Jesus being arrested, and suffering the lash, and being unfairly judged, and dying on the cross. How was that going to fix anything? It all sounded just entirely too weak and foolish.

Now as a theologian, I always want to point out that the cross cannot be separated from the resurrection. Paul of course, knew that and we can see that clearly in his other letters. But in

our text for today, Paul chooses to focus on the cross. He says, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

Like the ancient Corinthians, the world today wants common sense answers, productive techniques, motivational stories about how to solve the serious problems we face. The message about Jesus suffering on a cross, forgiving his enemies, and dying for our sins - well, it sounds foolish.

Paul says Greeks, that the gentiles, want wisdom. That is they want high-sounding ideas, carefully and logically explained. Jews want signs. That is to say the Jews are looking for miracles - that is overwhelming powerful signs that God is on our side and crushing the enemy. Both are disappointed in the message of the cross.

Our world too, thinks the message of the cross is foolishness, because the world is looking for the wrong thing. The world is looking for a way to get the most out of God. Whereas, Christians know that the gospel is not about our getting the most out of God. Rather, it is about God getting the most out of us. Jesus came asking us to work for him. He did not come promising to be our errand boy.

Remember how the first disciples argued about who was going to be great in the kingdom of heaven? They were still thinking in terms of what the world considers great. The world considers great those who have the most power over others. In contrast, the message of the cross seems foolish. For it is a message about suffering, and serving.

Before the last supper, Jesus humbled himself and washed the disciple's feet. That was the job of a slave, or lowly servant - anyone of position or power would never need to wash anyone's feet. Yet Jesus showed us how to be servants. And he said, "Those who want to be great in the kingdom of heaven must be the servants of all."

Paul asks the congregation at First Corinth to look at themselves. He says "Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many of you were of noble birth. 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; God chose 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."

The world looked at the first Christians and was unimpressed. Yet, God changed the world through them. The world looks at us today and is unimpressed. Yet, God is doing great things through us.

Paul goes on to say that the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of people. We who are being saved get to see the wisdom of the cross unmasking the futile ways of the world. We get to see God bring to nothing that which seems great.

Some of you may remember this poem by Shelly.

Ozymandias

*I met a traveler from an antique land
 Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
 Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,
 Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
 the hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:
 And on the pedestal these words appear:
 "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings;
 Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
 Nothing beside remains, Round the decay
 Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

Every merely human work will pass away, but the work of the Lord endures forever.

The good news is that God is still at work today, using the low and the ordinary to work his wonders.

One pastor relates this story: *We were a very small congregation. The few of us struggled to keep our building in shape and a roof over our heads. We had two young families. Both of them left in order to find "A church more suitable to our needs, a church that has some quality programs for our kids."*

Yet one Sunday when I asked the congregation, "Does anyone have a testimony to give about God's work in your life?" A young man rose. He had joined our church a year or so before. He was the shy type. We were surprised that he stood to speak.

"I want to say that I met God through you. I had a bad experience with church as a kid. When I came here, I was at the end of my rope. I had even thought of ending my life because I was so depressed about the way my life had gone, so sad about all my failures to get started in life. You learned my name and gave me a job to do on my second Sunday! Invited me to dinner even when I wasn't in your family. I had spent my whole life trying to find God. Here, God found me. This church saved my life." (Pulpit Resources, January, February, March 2017, pg. 17)

These words from the cross apply to us this morning, listen again: "God chose who the world considers foolish to shame the wise. God chose what the world considers weak to shame the strong. And God chose what the world considers low-class . . . to reduce what is considered to be something to nothing."

The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. As we go to meditation and prayer, consider the good news from the cross. Amen.