

1 Corinthians 1:18-31 (NRSVue)

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 scholar? 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 the proclamation, to save those who believe. ²² For Jews ask for 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 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 abolish things that are, ²⁹ so that no one might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ In contrast, God is why you are 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.”

Foolishness

Something that you should know about me is that I really do enjoy reading and studying the Epistles. I find them fascinating. I think that they’re unique among the scriptures, in the Old and New Testaments both, because they speak to the life of the people after receiving Christ: as a savior, as the Son of God, as an example to follow. They’re so full of people trying to understand and help one another to understand what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and the most fascinating part is that they don’t always get it right. There’s so much evidence, in this book alone, Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, that the church in Corinth has been missing the mark. And I find that a beautiful image of what it means to be a child of God: we won’t always get it right. But we will have the power to stay together, to work through any misunderstandings together, and to come closer to a conclusion as we journey through this life together, about what it means to follow Jesus.

I do want to be clear though, when I speak about the church in Corinth that Paul is writing to. There are some words that we might use today, like “church” and “early Christians” that might be a bit misleading. Like, there wasn’t necessarily a church that we might think of

today in Corinth. There likely wasn't a big building with a sanctuary and pews, a pulpit, or an organ or piano. Instead, the "church" was probably more of gatherings of individuals in peoples' homes. Likewise, to call them "Christians," while true in the most basic sense of the word, they didn't have many, if any, of the same practices that we have today, and neither did they have the same theological convictions. When I talk about these early followers of Jesus, I might refer to "the church" or to "early Christians," but it's important to remember that while there is a thread that connects them to modern Christians, there are also many differences.

Whatever their practices were and however they worshipped, you should know that Paul had a hand in establishing this community of Jesus followers. He was there in Corinth for a while; he planted some worshipping communities and started some of their practices, and he would have been remembered by those who still lived and led these worshipping communities. As such, his words can be understood as spoken with authority. And Paul really does throw his weight around, even in this little snapshot of this letter, entirely out of context. We can understand that Paul means what he says. And he's saying quite a bit.

Would you please pray with me? ...

You should also know that there are divisions in the church. I'm not talking about the divisions of today, of which there are *many*, but I'm talking about the church in Corinth. Paul has just finished speaking about these divisions, and we'll read his words on that point next week. We're sort of moving backwards, I know, but in my defense, it was very cold last weekend. The sermon I was going to preach doesn't make sense if we're not in person, and if we're not doing some officer installation, like we're having next Sunday. But there were divisions in the church in Corinth, about who they were and who they were called to be. The big question was who they represented as a worshipping community: there were those who wanted the church to reflect the authority of Paul, or the charisma of another disciple of Paul's, Apollos, or of the steadfast apostleship and leadership of Peter.

There were different factions of people as the church began to splinter. There were some who were very well educated, and there were those who were of noble birth, who were rich. And these people thought that because of their privileges, which they took as a sign of blessings and favor from God, they deserved to be leaders in the church. And there were others who were not as well educated, who were not rich or of noble birth, who asserted that the former group of people were arrogant blowhards, who didn't deserve church leadership, and therefore it fell to them. One can imagine fingers pointing across the aisle, each side saying "We're better than you." Perhaps there was a bit of thumbing their noses, too.

So in the midst of this division and fracturing, that probably seems familiar to many of us in the room today, Paul writes to the church in Corinth. He addresses these divisions, and in doing so, focuses not on any one person, or even one group of people. He instead speaks of the cross. The cross, Paul argues is the central way to understand God, as well as God's choice of the Corinthian believers. Because the cross, and the message of it, is a confusing message. In Greek, the words are *Ὁ λόγος ... ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ* (*ho logos ho tou staurou*) - literally, the word, or message, of the cross. Interestingly enough, the word *logos* is where we get the English word

“logic” from. But the *logos*, the word, or rational message, to Jews was the law and Wisdom. For Greeks, the *logos*, or the word that they would have heard, reflects the reason behind the cosmic order. In other words, the *logos* to both Jews and Greeks of the time was logical and spiritual.

To say that the cross, this object that represents death and suffering, subjugation and defeat, is what saves, defies logic. For Jews to say that their Messiah was crucified made no sense. Messiahs don't get crucified, they win. They lead us out of evil, they don't fall to it. Likewise, for Greeks to say that their God bled for them would have made no sense. Gods don't bleed. No hero will be shamefully executed, especially if they're a god. The *logos*, the logic of the cross, is foolish to anyone who hears it. It contradicts any logical thought. It confounds the mind.

This is exactly Paul's point.

The message of the cross is confounding to the wisest of human minds. Trying to understand God by the means of human wisdom simply does not work. God chooses a different method to rescue humanity apart from our own logical conclusions of what a savior is: the wisdom, the message, the logic of the cross, which appears foolish to anyone who seeks another path for knowing Christ. People in Corinth, and today want signs and miracles to prove that God is acting to bring an end to the present age, while others want to know God through human wisdom and understanding. Paul is adamant that this is foolishness. But what appears as foolishness is really the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Still, though, it is pretty far-fetched. To say that wisdom is foolishness and folly is wisdom does not make sense. If we try to understand it, if the Corinthians tried to understand this, they'd probably get upset. I think we might too. I've heard something along these lines before. And it's frustrating to be told that “you just don't get it.” It would seem that this is Paul's conclusion here. The more you think this is foolishness, the more clear it is that you are not saved. And to be frank, that sounds a lot like crazy talk to me.

But then Paul says this: to those God has called, the crucified Messiah is “the power of God and the wisdom of God.” We are called, by Christ's crucifixion, to be different. We are called to live differently. This calling provides a new perspective from which we view the world, one that looks at how we live from God's new age, not from the age of humankind, and God is turning the world upside down. God started with the cross.

Case in point: the Corinthians themselves are a part of the chosen people of God. Paul writes that not many of them were wise, powerful, or of noble birth. These were sort of the societal bottom of the barrel. These were not people that anyone would expect to lead. Of course, Paul's language implies that some of them may have been wise, powerful, or of the nobility. The split that they had all but confirms this. But on the whole, very few of them had any gifts that should imply, to either them or to anyone around them, that they should be chosen, blessed, and honored by God. This is foolishness according to the world. The world would say that, of course the privileged few should have the authority over all the others. It would seem that the church in Corinth, at least the rich and privileged part of it, agreed with this sentiment. Yet God chooses the weak, the lowly, and those whom the world despises. God chose the things that are nothing in

the world's eyes, to make the things the world values worthless. God chose these Christ followers in Corinth for this purpose, both the wealthy few *and* the underprivileged many.

And as a result, no one can boast or brag in God's presence. Our human presumption of other people, our human understanding of the world, is what establishes worth or value. You only have as much value as what you can give back to the world. You are only worth as much as you generate in the economy. You are only important if you have the power to make the rules. God, however, turns that around. Now, in the world that God is creating, worth and value are dependent on God's initiative. God brings these believers into union with Christ, God calls them to be holy ones, saints, in the "partnership of his Son, Jesus Christ."¹ And God's call is fundamental, more important than any societal recognition or human ability or strength or knowledge that they might have. Now, their worth and value depend on God.

And this is the reality of God's rule: God has chosen what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to abolish things that are. God chose the cross, a tool of oppression and execution, a way of quelling rebellion and instilling fear in the masses, and made it into a tool of salvation. God chose the poor and lowly to be the first in Christ. This was not simply to upend the status quo. God was not simply bored, and God did not simply make these choices to say "I'm bigger than you." God does this to upend the status quo *and* in order to create life. The status quo was stifling. It was oppressive. It was, and remains, a way for those in power to keep it. But the reality is that God is the source of their lives. Paul says that "God is why you," Corinthians, "are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption."

It will always be sheer madness, utter foolishness, to proclaim the good news in a crucified savior, to say that salvation is not bought or earned, but received as a gift in spite of ourselves. And the reality of our situation today is that there is plenty that is going on in our world that is creating divisions. Despite all that we do, all that we say and believe, there are still people in the world who believe that the cross is nothing but an instrument of destruction. It's a tool of abuse, and the world is better when we have these systems in place. According to the Greeks and Jews, according to the world today, gods don't bleed. Saviors don't die. They win. They *conquer*. Only losers don't do these things. And so the world behaves as such.

When the world is dog-eat-dog, when gods have power *over* people, and when saviors don't sacrifice but rather *dominate*, we get what happens in the world today. We get abuse. We get injustice. We get mistreatment of the "little people" by the "big guys." We get people who are afraid to leave their homes, because their neighbors are being accosted for the color of their skin. We get people who stand up to that injustice, only to be shot and killed for speaking out against the mistreatment of others. And we get people, many of whom claim to be followers of Christ, who condemn not the ones with all the power for abusing that power, but the ones who are abused. Those people would say that they got what they deserved.

The world still rewards power, and those who grasp at it with everything they have. The world still has a culture of success. The world still belittles those who seek peace, and still beats

¹ 1 Cor 1:9.

down those who cannot defend themselves. And friends, I am *tired* of this. I am *tired* of being told that this is the only way forward. I am tired of being told that the ways of mercy and peace, the way of the cross and of Christ, is foolish. Because to the world, even to some followers of Christ, the cross is still folly. The wisdom of God is still foolishness, because God says that the ones who are being stepped on, those who have made power itself into a god to be worshipped, will be abolished.

The reality is also that God is still taking the things that are *not* to abolish things that *are*. God is still on the side of those without power, without money, that are despised by the world and hoping that they will be cast aside. God is still with them. God is still making all things new through Jesus Christ. God is not on the side of those who abuse, who create divisions, who seek to hold onto their power by distraction or exploitation. For God is using the things that are *not* to abolish the things that *are*. And while this is exhausting, while this is perhaps too much for us to bear, the good news is that God is still here. God is with us, and how the world is is not how it will be forever.

And so, the message of the cross is foolishness. To the world, and perhaps to us, this is true. But Paul proclaims, Jesus proves, that salvation does not belong to the powerful, or the wise, or the prestigious. It is the act of God, demonstrated most vividly in the suffering on the cross. God has chosen the path of weakness, Paul says, so that no one may boast in God. In other words, the cross stands as a reminder that God is God, and we are not. We cannot claim any power, any lordship over anything that God already does. We are the children of God, blessed and ordained, in our power, in our weakness, in our wealth, in our poverty, in all that we are and everything in between. We are called to follow Christ. So, let us remember where Christ is. Let us remember *who* Christ is. And as we go back into the world, let us remember that the ways of God are not the ways of the world.

According to God, love will win. According to God, the meek shall inherit the earth. According to God, what is foolish is wisdom, and what is human wisdom is folly. Vanity of vanities, says the teacher, all is vanity. Because let us not forget, just a few short weeks ago, we celebrated Christmas. We recognize that our transcendent God came to earth as a baby. Jesus took on a human life; God claimed our weakness as an avenue of power. The Bible bears witness to a God who hears the cries of the weak, who defends the widows and orphans, of a Christ who bore the hate and pain and suffering of an excruciating death; of course, Paul shares this with the Corinthians! At the end of everything, the faith of a Christian is not “look at how the hero who conquers the world,” but rather, “What wondrous love is this?”

The allure of elite education, family connections, and cultural power persists today. The temptation towards power, worldly power, and of arrogance and pride and corruption that comes with those credentials and that power, is all too real. But Paul teaches us that true value is not in these things. True value is not found in the wisdom of this age, that teaches that this is the only way to get ahead, and if you’re not first, you’re last. There is foolishness in the cross, that goes against the wisdom of the world. Let us embrace that foolishness. For in the cross, there is true

wisdom. There is life. There is light. Let us shine that light to the world. Let God's kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.