

“Foolishness or Wisdom?”

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

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In our scripture passage this morning, Paul asks the question, “Where is the one who is wise?” And that’s a question that we seem to be asking these days, isn’t it? Last week’s Saturday Night Live opened with a character portraying US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner speaking to the nation. He said, “Earlier today, I proposed that the Treasury department set aside \$420 billion. This \$420 billion will be placed in a special fund, and it will go to the first individual who comes up with a workable plan to solve the banking crisis.” He then went on to say that if you or someone you know has such a plan, there is an 800- number that you can call to reach the federal government.<sup>1</sup>

Where is the one who is wise? At times like this, it seems that nobody has the right solution. And yet, we long for wisdom, don’t we. Not just for the financial crisis, but for everything in life. We tend to seek the advice of those we deem to be experts. We yearn for wisdom. Rabbi Ben-Azai is quoted as saying, “In seeking wisdom thou art wise; in imagining that thou hast attained it thou art a fool” and I think he gets it right.

You see, our scripture passage this morning tells us that the so-called wisdom of our world won’t lead us to a life of faith. Paul begins this passage with the statement “The message about the cross is foolishness.” He goes on to quote Isaiah to show how mere human wisdom is bound to fail. Isaiah proclaimed that God will destroy the wisdom of the wise and will thwart the discernment of the discerning. For all the worldly wisdom throughout the ages has never led people to God’s wisdom. The wisdom of God is something entirely different.

Paul is contrasting wisdom versus wisdom, not wisdom versus faith. We don’t have to turn our brains off to be faithful. Paul is talking about having the right relationship with God and living in God’s wisdom rather than the world’s wisdom. Our wisdom, our intellectual understanding won’t save us, but the right relationship will. The wisdom of God will.

So what is God’s wisdom? For Paul, it was summed up in the message of the cross. This phrase “message of the cross” is kind of like Paul’s shorthand for what we would consider the Gospel message, the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

To the Greeks of Paul’s time, this message was mere foolishness. Greek thought held that God must not be able to feel, because if God can feel joy or sorrow or anger or grief it means that some human had, for at least a moment, influenced God, and by being able to influence God, would therefore be greater than God. So, if God is the greatest thing there is, God must be incapable of feeling or suffering – being influenced by humans. It was also revolting to Greeks that God might become a man and be involved in human affairs. It would be insulting to God. In their minds, if God is good and beautiful and happy and that which is most beautiful and best, how can God become a human? We all

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<sup>1</sup> *Saturday Night Live*, March 7, 2009

know that humanity is not always good and beautiful and happy and always at its best. The incarnation, for the Greek mind therefore, was a total impossibility. Why would God do that? Why would God suffer the humiliation, pain and prejudice that Jesus faced?

There are some who might feel the same way today. But I think there are even more in today's world who have difficulty with the rest of the Gospel story. Even if we accept that God came into the world in human form, what God would be born to a lower-class carpenter father and a teenage unwed mother? And born in a barn? How foolish is that? Wouldn't you think God would be born in a good hospital with the best medical care, and to a powerful family who has it together enough to be able to take care of him?

And then when Jesus grew up, his choice of friends was pretty suspicious. They're not the type our mothers would want us hanging out with. Jesus hung out with prostitutes, lepers, tax collectors, the needy, the lonely, the poor, the hopeless. How foolish is that?! What good would that do? That's not the way to affect real change, is it? He should have been hanging out with the religious or political elite of his time. That's where he can make a real difference, isn't it?

And then to cap it all off, Jesus gets himself into trouble with the authorities, gets arrested, and is sentenced to the death penalty. So we should believe that a person who served time on death row is the son of God? You're nuts! It's scandalous to think something like that. In fact, the Greek word we translate as "stumbling block" in today's passage is the Greek word "skandalon," which is where we get the English word scandal. Just think about it...wearing a beautiful cross necklace would be like wearing a beautiful electric chair necklace or a beautiful gas chamber necklace. At the center of our worship is an instrument of capital punishment. How foolish is that?!

To the Jews, this whole idea was a huge stumbling block. According to their tradition, one who died on a cross could not be the chosen one. Deuteronomy 21:23 says "He that is hanged is accursed by God." To the Jews, Jesus' crucifixion proved it finally that he wasn't the messiah.

So imagine someone today came up with the same story that Jesus had. A low-class guy who hangs out with his low-class friends and gets the death penalty. And he claims to be the son of God, and that through him we should believe in God and have some sort of religious experience? Sounds pretty silly to me.

And if the story of Jesus wasn't foolish enough, what about his teachings? By today's conventional wisdom, Jesus' teachings aren't sensible, they're not responsible, and they're not practical. They go against everything we have learned as to how to survive in today's world. If we were to follow Jesus and put his teaching into practice, we'd look pretty darn foolish, and we don't like looking foolish, do we? Just think of some of them...

Give everyone the gift of love even when they don't deserve it. Treat everyone the same, despite what they have done or what they will do. This means your enemies as well as your friends. You should pray for those who persecute you rather than seeking revenge. If someone takes your coat, give them all your clothing as well. Forgive people when they have wronged you. Be willing to share everything you have so that others will benefit. Be willing to give up everything you hold dear, even your closest relationships, anything that is holding you back from a deeper relationship with God. Be willing to give up your very life if that's what it takes.

The wisdom of our world says that we'd be a fool if we did these things. We'd get used, abused, taken advantage of. We'd be irresponsible and end up broke, a drain on the rest of us. This message of Jesus is utter foolishness – according to the wisdom of this world.

Ah, but to those who believe, the message of the cross is the power of God!

You see, if Jesus hung around and loved people he shouldn't, he might just be willing to hang out with and even love me! If Jesus knew what it was like to be tempted, to be looked down upon, to be abused, to be victimized, to be hated, maybe Jesus and maybe God really knows what I'm going through, and maybe I can get through it too. If Jesus was willing to forgive even the people who crucified him and if Jesus was willing to grant eternal life to the criminal dying on the cross next to him, maybe God might be willing to forgive what I have done and maybe I might have a place with Jesus in eternity. Maybe I might even be able to help bring a slice of heaven here on earth so that others may experience it.

God's wisdom, the wisdom of the cross is foolishness to our worldly wisdom. And so maybe we need to be a little bit foolish. Maybe we need to be utterly ridiculous.

Bishop William Willimon once said, "One of the dangers of being in church as often as I am is that it all starts to make sense. I speak of the Christian faith so casually and effortlessly that I begin to think, 'Fine thing, this Christianity. Makes good sense.' And then I find myself believing all sorts of things in church that I wouldn't let anyone put over on me in the *real* world. That which people would choke on in everyday speech, they will swallow if it's in a sermon. That's a blessing for those of us who get paid to preach Christ crucified."

And then he quoted Kierkegaard when he said, "Christianity has taken a giant stride into the absurd," and again, "Remove from Christianity its ability to shock and it is altogether destroyed. It then becomes a tiny superficial thing, capable neither of inflicting deep wounds nor of healing them."

Bishop Willimon continued, "It's when the absurd starts to sound reasonable that we should begin to worry. 'Blessed are the meek. . . .' 'Thou shalt not kill.' 'Love your enemies.' 'Go, sell all you have and give to the poor.' Be honest now. Blessed are the meek? Try being meek tomorrow at work and see how far you get. Meekness is fine for church, but in the *real* world the meek get to go home early with a pink slip and a pat on the back. Blessed are those who are peacemakers? They shall get done to them what they

don't want to do to others. Blessed are the merciful? They shall get it done to them a second time. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake? They shall be called fanatics."

He concluded, "As Paul says, when you hear the gospel not with Sunday-morning ears but with Monday-morning ears, it can sound foolish indeed -- tragically foolish or comically foolish, depending upon one's point of view."<sup>2</sup>

The call to discipleship from this week's text is to be willing to be foolish according to the conventional wisdom of the day. If you're anything like me, there have been times when you felt you should do something because of your faith, but you didn't because you didn't want to look foolish. So what is it that you feel God calling you to do, but that you find yourself unwilling to do because someone might think you foolish?

For some, it might mean trusting that God will provide, despite our need to be self-sufficient. For others, it might mean talking to someone about our faith, even though the world says that faith is a personal matter. God might be calling some of us to believe, to have faith, despite our inability to prove the matters of faith. Some might be called to give sacrificially, even foolishly, to those in need. It may be that some are called to spend a little more on what they buy to ensure that the people producing the product are paid a living wage. Some might be called to offer forgiveness to someone that the world would say they have no need to forgive.

I am confident that each of us will encounter an opportunity at some point, maybe in the next week, maybe even today or tomorrow, to risk looking foolish in the eyes of the world as a result of our faith. May we all have the courage to choose God's foolish wisdom over the wisdom of the world.

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<sup>2</sup> William Willimon, "Looking Like Fools" *Christian Century* March 10, 1982, p. 261.