

Fools for Christ?
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
January 29, 2023
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Grand Rapids MI

This week I have struggled to write this sermon with unbelievable struggle. In part because I am seeking a way to explain Paul's concepts lifted up in the passage when it is in the middle of a four-chapter explanation of Paul's theology about the power of the Cross. But I am also struggling because Paul is appealing to the people of Corinth to identify with the outcast and lowly of society when they would rather be seen as the elite and privileged as the church in Corinth. An issue that we see much of western Christianity imitating.

This young church is struggling because they have not fully grasped the true meaning of the teachings they have heard from Paul, Apollos and Cephas as we heard last week. But what little they received and believed they have become proud and boastful about.

Paul, having been raised as a Hellenistic Jew meaning a Devout Jewish person raised within the Roman Empire and trained both in the schools of Greek philosophy and in the Jewish rabbinic school. Paul sees and understands now the shortcomings of both arenas of human thought. The Greeks crave knowledge and believe if they can become wise enough or discover some hidden wisdom, that they will attain some level of divinity or immortality. While the Jewish mindset for Paul was to uphold and believe the faith traditions of the Torah seeking the Messiah. Paul touches on it here when he says "For Jews ask for signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." (1 Cor. 1:22-25)

Why would anyone believe in a dead Messiah or Savior? If Jesus was really who he said he was why did he die? So Paul sarcastically agrees with them that yes it is foolishness to believe that the sacrificial act of Jesus dying on the cross could be powerful and more powerful than any wisdom found in this world.

As his defense, Paul launches into this topsy Turvy comparison of the Kingdom of God verses this world. He goes on to say that the difference really is based on our ability to believe, without a sign and without full understanding, Why? Because God chose us to believe. Hence this is where the Christian Reformed tradition, especially Calvinist Reformers claim the belief of Pre-destination upon. We are called by Christ to become believers, we are predestined to be Christians because of God's calling on our lives.

At the end of today's reading we even see three times that Paul says to the Corinthians: "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.

1. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise;
2. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;
3. God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to abolish things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

This highlights the divine truth that is counterculture and counter intuitive to the wisdom of the age. God chose the outcast, the poor and the weak of this world to bear the truth of God. We heard it in the Beatitudes read this morning.

Then Paul concludes with these words: "In contrast, God is why you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Paul understands that he is just a vessel through which the saving Power of God is proclaimed because he believes and proclaims the spiritual truth that God had provided all for our salvation through Jesus Christ.

We cannot earn it, we cannot gain knowledge and understanding to be experts in it, but we must surrender ourselves to God, just as Christ also surrendered to the cross. Paul says this another way in Philippians 2:2-11

“Make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he existed in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be grasped,

but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

assuming human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a human,

he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

Therefore God exalted him even more highly

and gave him the name

that is above every other name,

so that at the name given to Jesus

every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue should confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

In Chapter four of 1 Corinthians, Paul returns to the beginning concept of people boasting who baptized them and says: I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us what “Not beyond what is written” means, so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another.” (1 Cor. 4:5-6)

Once again he highlights the foolishness of faith, we hear in chapter 1. In Chapter 4 beginning in verse 8 “Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! If only you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you! For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to humans. We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are sensible people in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are honored, but we are dishonored. To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are naked and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.”

Paul calls us still today to be fools for Christ. We are called to empty ourselves of any false notion that we have the ability to save ourselves or that we some how can achieve the blessings of God for ourselves without fully relying on the Gift of God provided to the world through Jesus Christ and him crucified. This is the Gospel, today for the people of God today.