

We Are People of the Cross

In our New Testament Scripture for this third Sunday of Advent, we read one of the Apostle Paul's most important statements about a life-changing experience with the cross of Jesus. Follow as I read **1 Corinthians 1:18-31**:

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 scribe? 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 our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand 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 the 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 reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no one might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ He is the source of your life 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."

Some things don't ever change! The church in first century Corinth met with problems similar to those faced today. In retrospect, the culture and mindset of ancient Corinth presaged that of western society today. It was a culture that worshiped its heroes, who represented style over substance. Their heroes were the orators and scholars that articulated the conventional wisdom of the day. Those who could make the best appearance and impression were the ones who became the leaders, whether their speech and conduct had integrity or not.

The Greek religious mentality was able to divorce, in good New Age fashion, spirituality from revealed truth, and conventionally accepted behavior from ethics and morals. A person could be considered spiritually elite and his or her teaching regarded as philosophically profound, even if their ethics and morals were promiscuous. Even some in the congregation of the church in Corinth were caught up in the spirit of the age, and fancied themselves as being people of a specially-endowed wisdom. They worshiped their oratorical heroes like today's westerners do our super athletes, musicians and movie stars. The Corinthians were enamored by their public speaking celebrities who seemed to have the

most power and control over their audience. As is often true today, people valued style over substance. Paul reminds these misled congregants that they had forgotten the message of the gospel, which is centered in the cross of Jesus. The message of the cross is the source and essence of real wisdom, and also is the only power that can eternally and profoundly change a human life.

The disciple of Christ is one who is committed to the message of the cross of Jesus as the reference point for the wisdom that the world so desperately needs. Whereas the world's wisdom begins and ends with futility, the cross of Jesus Christ reveals the truth about a holy and loving God. The cross shows that Jesus, the crucified now risen Lord, is the truth of God. To know and follow him is to come to grips with our sin, and to be in possession of a life-changing relationship with a loving God. But to the fallen world, whether in first century Corinth, or in Madison, Wisconsin, the message of the cross is foolishness. Peterson's *Message* paraphrases verse 18...

"The Message that points to Christ on the Cross seems like sheer silliness to those hell-bent on destruction..."

The Jews of the first century regarded the message of the cross as a stumbling block (23). The message is that all religious effort to merit salvation by works is futile. Only by the undeserved gift of the cross can sinners be made right with holy God. So, the religious dismiss the cross as an offensive replacement for their religious efforts and a nullification of all their acquired merit. It's scandalous to the dutifully religious to think that pagan outsiders will get the same treatment and eternal reward as they.

The Geeks, the secular folks, regarded Paul's message of the cross as sheer silliness. How could a crucified Jew claim to be a savior? The philosophy of Paul's world centered on what specially-endowed and privileged Greeks could know and articulate with eloquence. The culturally elite dismissed Paul and his preaching about the cross as "sheer silliness." But Paul knew that the message of the cross was God's revelation of true wisdom, and those who believe this message are given the true wisdom of God.

The child of God is one whose life has been changed by the cross of Christ. Our being in a love relationship with God is because of his sheer mercy and grace extended from the cross on which Christ Jesus suffered and died for our sins. The cross is the greatest fact about our lives and the center of our witness and our message as followers of Christ. And we can expect our world to regard the message of the cross as foolishness in the dim light of our information-glutted yet unwise age. We know that apart from Christ's atoning suffering and death on the cross we too would be without hope and without God in this world (Ephesians 2:12).

Robert Webber describes “Wal-Mart churches” that provide what people want, and not necessarily what they need. The Millennial Generation, those born since 1980, are looking for something authentic in place of ersatz Christianity. They’re looking back to traditions like the early church and the Reformation to find examples of believers who held to, lived by, and proclaimed the true gospel of the cross.

The Holy Scriptures, containing the gospel of the cross, are able to make us “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15, NIV). The cross is the only way of salvation. If there could have been any other way, then the cup would have passed from the Savior. The way of the cross is the wisdom of God, telling us about our sin, and about a holy God who must punish sin. For the born-again, there’s an entrance into the life in the Spirit. For those to whom God gives grace to believe, there’s also given an understanding of his word and will.

I’ve known truly wise people who lacked formal education, yet who knew the Lord Jesus and the Bible. Though deficient in cultural sophistication, they were educated in the truth about God and themselves. They understand life and God’s creation and purposes far more than even the most scholarly who don’t know the wisdom of God. The foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom.

The Apostle Paul understood the cross to be the *summum bonum* of his life and ministry, the supreme good in his life from which all other blessings were derived. Apart from the message and power of the cross Paul knew he would be eternally separated from God. That’s why he was devoted to proclaim the message of the cross and to live by its power, and even boast in the cross as the means by which God used to change his life forever (Galatians 6:14).

By God’s gracious initiative, when the message of the cross is preached, he sends forth his convicting Spirit into the hearts of his chosen. This is why Paul determined to know nothing but the cross when he preached. He made the cross the central theme of his preaching. His resolve in Corinth was his resolve everywhere, and that was to make the message of the cross central. Our interpretation of all of Scripture must be against the backdrop of the cross.

The great 19th Century British preacher, CH Spurgeon, in one of his lectures to his students at his pastor’s college, admonished them in all of their sermons, whatever the text and theme, to “make a beeline to the cross.”

In his biography of Billy Graham, John Pollock relates a turning point in the world famous evangelist’s life. Young Graham was being influenced by Charles Templeton, who was enamored by liberal theology, and wanted his friend Billy to take a broad view of Scripture and not “limit” himself to a narrow preaching of the simple gospel message.

Billy went for a prayer walk in the California woods where he was leading a Bible conference, and confessed to God there were things in the Bible that he could not explain, yet he was going to, from that moment on, preach with authority the simple gospel. Said young Graham: "So I went back and got my Bible, and I went out in the moonlight. And I got to a stump and put the Bible on the stump, and I knelt down, and said, 'Oh, God; I cannot prove certain things. I cannot answer some of the questions Chuck is raising and some of the people are raising, but I accept this Book by faith as the Word of God.'"

Thousands can be grateful that Billy Graham made this resolve, which reflected Paul's. We need to go deep in our understanding of the Word, and we must appreciate serious biblical scholarship, yet there's much in Scripture we'll not understand till eternity. Whatever other themes we address, our perspective must ever be shaped by the Cross, with confidence in the power of the simple message of Christ crucified.

Paul says we have no reason to feel proud or to boast about our spiritual knowledge or giftedness. In the Greco-Roman world pride and boasting were considered virtues, and humility was a sign of weakness, a "dog virtue". Yet Paul reminds the church we belong to a new community of the redeemed who all know we're debtors to the grace of God, and find our strength in dependence on him.

Jesus announced he had come to give the gospel and deliverance to the poor, who were so neglected and often omitted from the realm of the temple. So, the social composition of the church should be a sign of God's choice of the foolish, the weak, the low, and despised. As one said, "We should look around our congregations on Sunday. If we see too many of the educated, the powerful, and the wealthy and too few of the poor, we should ask ourselves whether we have somehow gone astray from God's purpose, distorted the gospel of the cross, and fallen into captivity to human wisdom. Paul does not exactly condemn education, power, and wealth in this passage, but merely suggests that God has made it foolish and irrelevant" with those he's chosen (Hayes).

God shows himself strong in our weak, cruciform lives. He delights in using those of us who're ordinary, and can't point to self, and say "look what I did for God, with all my wealth, wisdom, learning and influence." Ordinary folks like us are to take the message of the cross to those in need, who recognize their need. The poor and broken are the quickest to do so. The Apostle to the Gentiles understood well that the way to the hearts of the religious Jews and the pagan Greeks was not by human wisdom, but by lives characterized by the cross and being remade into Christ's likeness.

As followers of Jesus, the cross is to be central in our lives. Our rootless world is yearning for the healing grace of God, and we've the answer, not in theology, but in the person of Christ Jesus. We share, not out of our power, wealth, and

worldly influence, but out of our own weakness and vulnerability. Just as the power of Christ comes from his surrender and death on the cross, so does the power of our life and witness come from our admission of weakness. We've nothing to offer God or our neighbor anything of our own doing or making.

As never before I'm gaining an understanding that as Jesus' disciples we're called to live a cruciform life, one that bears witness that we've entered into the pattern of Christ's life, the pattern of the cross and resurrection. Jesus is reliving his life through us. We're filling up the full measure of his suffering and death, but we're also giving evidence to the power of the resurrection (Galatians 2:20; Colossians 1:24).

The Holy Spirit is at work drawing people to the Father the same way he drew them to himself when Jesus walked the earth. He draws them to the holy loving Savior who has always been the Christ of the cross. As the cross had its magnetic power when Jesus was lifted up at Calvary, so the cross still draws people through the faithful lives and words of his followers (John 12:32). Only when we are clothed with the presence of Christ himself will the cynical culture around us give a hearing to the gospel of the cross, which to them first appears as foolish as was the gospel to the Jews and Gentiles of the first century.

I know that in my life and ministry twelve years ago, it was necessary for me to experience an amount of cross bearing and death to self-will. This painful process of death to self-centered self is still going on in my old age. It's high time for me to surrender to and trust in Christ, believing that he will resurrect me in his time and in his own way, either in this life or the next. As God's people we must live the life of the cross and be armed with the message of the cross. It's a hard one for the unbelieving world to understand and accept, but it's also the only message that can change the world. We are entrusted with the message of the cross, which reveals God's wisdom and releases his powerful work. The cross of Christ is still our pattern for a life story worth telling. Some things never change!