

"God's Foolishness"

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¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." ²⁰Where 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? ²¹For 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. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

(1 Corinthians 1:18-25)

It's funny, every time I hear the word "foolishness" I think of a grandparent, probably because I am pretty sure that my grandmother was the first person I ever heard utter that word. I have no recollection of what she had seen. Today it might be a kid wearing the waist of his pants down around his mid-thigh, or one of those inane political conversations on television news. I don't remember what particular "foolishness" had gotten her goat, but I do remember how she said that word. Whatever that word was describing, it was clear that I would do well to avoid it.

The apostle Paul, who used rhetoric brilliantly and knew how to craft a winning argument, understood that most everyone has learned that same lesson. Just as we instinctively know that, when it comes to the difference between darkness and light, we should prefer the light and avoid the darkness, so we also learn that wisdom is good, and that foolishness is the opposite of wisdom. It is therefore surprising, to say the least, that Paul seems to flip these age-old tables over like an angry Jesus in the temple, scattering our assumptions about foolishness across the ground like the coins of a crooked moneychanger. Paul seems to be telling us that wisdom, which we thought was good, is really bad, and foolishness, which we thought was bad, is actually good. God, Paul says, "will destroy the wisdom of the wise." God has "made foolish the wisdom of the world." According to Paul, God uses the *foolishness* of the gospel to save the world.

It is quite the plot twist, especially given all that is said about wisdom and foolishness in the Old Testament. After all the fundamental goal of the entire book of Proverbs is to share and promote wisdom while also helping people avoid foolishness and folly.¹ In the world of Proverbs, foolishness is anything that results from a lack of sense, something ill-considered, lacking forethought. It can denote something petty or insignificant. Foolishness most often manifests itself as a refusal to listen, an unreasonable denial of responsibility for one's own actions, or a stubborn resistance to correction that is sorely needed. Foolishness is personified as the "immoral" or "forbidden" woman — someone dark and dangerous who lures innocent people into peril. Wisdom, on the other hand, is equated with insight, understanding, prudence, intelligence and true happiness. In fact, wisdom is personified in chapter 8 with such lofty terms that many see in Lady Wisdom an Old Testament mirror of Christ.

So, Paul must be doing something else here. His words should not be understood as an endorsement of foolishness, nor do they constitute a license for Christians to be foolish. A good

¹ Claudia V. Camp and Carole R. Fontaine, "Proverbs," *The Harper Collins Study Bible* (San Francisco: Harper), 1989, p. 849.

example is the advice that a particular preacher gave a few weeks ago that Christians do not need to get a flu shot because, in essence, Jesus is our flu shot. She told her listeners to refuse a flu shot, even as children and adults were literally dying from the illness. "We've already had our shot," she said, because Jesus "bore our sicknesses and carried our diseases." I can't imagine what my grandmother would have done with that one, having had one of her children die of polio at the age of twelve and then enduring the added terror of watching two more children struggle with the same deadly disease. "Foolishness" would have been the kindest word she could have used.

You and I know that we are not supposed to check our brains at the door when we come to faith. God gave us brains and eyes and ears and imaginations and memories, and God gave them to us because God wants us to use them. We are called to love God with all of our heart, all of our souls and all of our *minds*. In our individual lives, we seek both knowledge of the Bible and knowledge of the world to help us live faithfully. In the same way, the church follows certain "best practices" for corporate organization, website development, computer systems, and child protection programs. We pay bills on time and insure our buildings against fire damage. We try to be good stewards and wise spenders of money. In all of these ways, wisdom is still good, and foolishness is still bad.

So, Paul must be doing something else with wisdom and foolishness. I think the problem Paul is really getting at is what happens when we get wisdom wrong... when we mischaracterize foolishness as wisdom or wisdom as foolishness. Something can seem wise to us that, in the end, turns out to be really foolish. We in the church try our best to be wise, but sometimes we fall short, as evidenced by these bulletin announcements that actually made it into the pews:

1. *The support group for persons with low self-esteem will meet Thursday night at 7 p.m. Please use the basement door in the back.*
2. *Latecomers to worship are asked to wait until the service is over to be seated.*
3. *Barbara Smith remains in the hospital and needs blood donors for more transfusions. She is also having trouble sleeping and requests tapes of Pastor Nelson's sermons.*
4. *During the absence of our pastor, we enjoyed the rare privilege of hearing a good sermon when Dr. J.F. Stubbs supplied our pulpit.*

Unfortunately, I found that a lot of these have to do with preaching. But not all!

5. *The eighth-graders will be presenting Shakespeare's "Hamlet" in the church basement on Friday at 7 p.m. The congregation is invited to attend this tragedy.*
6. *The concert held in the Fellowship Hall was a great success. Special thanks are due to our minister's daughter, who labored the whole evening at the piano, which as usual fell upon her.*
7. *The community outreach committee has lined up 25 members to make calls on people who are not afflicted with any church.*
8. *Weight Watchers will meet at 7 p.m. Please use large double door at the side entrance.*
9. *The potluck supper will begin at 12:30; prayer and medication will follow.*

Despite our best efforts, sometimes our attempts to be wise end up being a bit foolish.

Likewise, something that seems ridiculous or foolish on its face can also turn out to be the wisest and best course of action. Many told Gandhi that he was foolish to think that non-violent resistance could end British occupation of India. Many told Martin Luther King, Jr. that it was madness to suffer beatings and unjust imprisonments without retaliation. But in the end, what had been dismissed as mere foolishness was shown to be great wisdom.

This is the exact point that Paul was trying to make to a world that was completely obsessed with Greek ideas of wisdom. Paul knew that, by using that particular word, he was drawing on the legacy of Plato and Aristotle, who taught that the "love of wisdom was a quest for light on the meaning of life, and ultimately for God." Paul knew that the Greek mindset saw life as an intellectual quest for betterment and strength. And he also knew that, to that same Greek mindset, the gospel of

the cross was complete and utter folly. It did not satisfy their intellectual cravings.² To the sophisticated Greek, the idea that a convicted felon could be the bearer of God's holiness and righteousness was preposterous. The idea that Plato's vision of ultimate good and beauty could be the ugly image of a crucified Jew was an absurdity. The idea that someone strong would submit to death without a fight was ludicrous. Even for the devout Jewish person, Paul knew that the suggestion that the Davidic messiah, before whom all the nations would kneel, would be someone who goes to death like a lamb to the slaughter was an offensive and heretical concept.³ This is the table-flipping move that Paul makes. The cross, Paul says, reveals these things we see as foolish to be the deepest, most life-changing wisdom. The cross should shatter our conceptions of what we see as wise and what we see as foolish.

What that means is that, in the church and in the life of faith, we cannot blithely dismiss something on the basis of worldly wisdom, because we can —and do —get it wrong. In all of the things we as a people are disagreeing about so passionately — how to keep our children safe in their schools; how to promote economic growth; what healthcare reform should look like; how to help people get out of poverty and into sustainable living — Paul says that the cross of Jesus Christ changes our normal approaches to wisdom in all of these matters and many more. That is not to say that we should be blindly foolish. True wisdom is still wisdom, and folly is still folly. What Paul is saying is that, for the Christian, the cross has redefined what it means to be strong, to be safe, to be healthy, to be faithful, and to be loving. Make no mistake, Paul says, the world will often say that the wisdom of the cross is nothing more than folly. “[T]he message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,” Paul writes. The vulnerability of the cross, the pain of the cross, the love of the cross, will all be dismissed by the world as a ridiculous story of “God’s foolishness.” But Paul says don’t believe it. For the Christian, the world has been forever changed by the cross, because we have seen that the cross is anything but weak. To us, Paul says, to those who are being saved by the witness of the cross, the apparent foolishness of the cross is really “*the power of God and the wisdom of God.*”

One last point to end on. A little foolishness can be a good thing. I’ve never quoted Cher in a sermon before, but since this is a sermon about foolishness I might as well try it now. I happen to agree with her on a point that she once made. “Until you’re ready to look foolish,” she said, “you’ll never have the possibility of being great.”⁴ She’s right. Christopher Columbus was called foolish for saying the earth was round. He was challenging the worldly wisdom of the day, which was convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt that the world was flat. Because he was willing to look a little foolish, he discovered a new world.

I don’t have to tell you that we Presbyterians tend to like everything all buttoned up and locked down tight. We are obsessed with doing everything decently and in order. We get nervous if we drop too many crumbs during communion, and downright panicky if some squares fall on the floor. We would rather do something more basic and do it well than dare to try something bigger and make some mistakes. Paul, however, opens up room for a little holy foolishness. Because the power of the cross has given us amazing hope, Paul says, we are called to “act with great boldness.”⁵ Throughout the Acts of the Apostles, Paul is always acting with boldness and confidence on behalf of the Lord, doing seemingly foolish things that get him in trouble and land him in jail. The reality is,

² *The Interpreter’s Bible: Volume 10 - Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians* (1953), pp 28-9.

³ Frederick Buechner, “Foolishness,” <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/blog/2018/2/26/weekly-sermon-illustration-foolishness?rq=foolishness>, accessed March 2, 2018.

⁴ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/63771-until-you-re-ready-to-look-foolish-you-ll-never-have-the>.

⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:12.

if we are not being a little foolish every now and then, we could be doing more for God. We could be learning more, accomplishing more, and making a bigger impact as disciples of Jesus Christ.⁶

One of my favorite parts of our congregation's recently-approved strategic plan, which you will be hearing more about in weeks to come, is the idea that we need to lay hold of a bold, new mission project for our church. As the committee members talked about it, they used the word "audacious." In hindsight, perhaps we should have used the word "foolish," because I think the committee had this Pauline idea in mind as they envisioned this new mission project. They want us to do something great for God, and it may just be that, until we are ready to look a little foolish together, we will never have the possibility of being great.

So, in this Lenten season... may our worldly definitions of wisdom be smashed by the power of the cross... may we embrace those aspects of God's selfless, sacrificial, loving wisdom that others dismiss as foolishness... and may we be given the courage to risk a little holy foolishness in pursuit of God's wisdom. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

⁶ <http://uncoveries.com/4-reasons-to-be-a-little-foolish/>.