

FOOLISHNESS INDEED

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Third Sunday of Lent

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Somewhere on Facebook, a picture got posted of a man standing at a lectern, speaking to a crowd, with words on a screen behind him. He was evidently lecturing on the Apostle Paul because here's what the words said:

General Pauline Letter Outline:

Grace.

I thank God for you.

Hold fast to the gospel.

For the love of everything holy, stop being stupid.

Timothy says hi.

That's all pretty much here in this letter to the church in Corinth, the community that Paul himself established, probably around A.D. 50 – (17 years or so after Jesus' death) when he arrived in this narrow isthmus of Greece, about 40 miles south of Athens. Corinth was a center of trade and shipping, a religious and commercial hub, filled with a largely immigrant population – gentiles and Jews, “sailors from everywhere under the sun.” (Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*, p. 195) Corinth had quite a reputation. Its inhabitants were characterized as “lacking charm and grace; the wealthy having disgusting, coarse, and objectional behavior; and the wretched poor having to grovel for the smallest morsel of food.” The very name of the city had become a verb: to ‘corinthianize’ meant ‘to go to the dogs.’ Worship of all kinds of gods was practiced: Isis, Serapis, Astarte, Artemis, and at the summit of a peak known as Acro-corinth stood the temple to the goddess Aphrodite, which employed the services of some one thousand sacred prostitutes.

From what we are told in the Book of Acts, Paul arrived and founded the church with converts from a Jewish synagogue; a few in the congregation were wealthy, the majority were from the lower classes. Paul stayed with this fledgling church about a year and a half, preaching the gospel, before heading out to continue his missionary efforts. This letter, then, is written after several years, when he is in Ephesus, evidently in answer to questions and problems he had heard the Corinthians were experiencing. Yes, that letter outline holds true: Grace. I thank God for you. Hold fast to the gospel, etc. etc.

So far as the “stop being stupid” part, Paul spends a great deal of time in his letter offering solutions to their many conflicts and disagreements. There were a number of factions in the church, disagreement about who they followed: Paul, Apollos, Cephas. There were arguments about going to court, sexual morality, questions about marriage, eating food consecrated to idols, correct ways to worship. From Paul's responses offering both admonishment and advice, we discern that this early church was in quite a turmoil. Yet through it all, Paul constantly and consistently says to them Hold fast to the gospel. Hold fast.

It is in the early part of his letter to the church at Corinth that Paul makes his central statement on which everything else relies – that is, the message of the cross. To this struggling congregation, he affirms that it is the cross --- Jesus' death and what God was doing in and

through it – that shapes their lives. Paul spends a lot of time in these verses acknowledging that this concept is a radical one. Radically foolish, in fact. To proclaim God’s power is present in a man who died on a Roman instrument of torture is, well, bizarre to most ears. It’s strange to ours, if we truly acknowledge it. So, too, to a community of faith that was surrounded by deities whose temples loomed large over their city – a sign of success and power and might.

As Frederick Buechner describes it:

The message that a convicted felon was the bearer of God’s forgiving and transforming love was hard enough for anybody to swallow and for some especially so. For hellenized sophisticates – the Greeks, it could only seem absurd. What uglier, more supremely inappropriate symbol of, say, Plato’s Beautiful and Good could there be than a crucified Jew? And for the devout Jew, what more scandalous image of the Davidic king-messiah, before whose majesty all the nations were at last to come to heel? (p. 199)

Ken said in this in his sermon last week: that “for the Jews, it was an offensive and scandalous and humiliating, shameful way to die.” (The Concerns of God) Paul acknowledges this as he writes:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For Jews demand signs, the text says, 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.

Something that made this especially difficult for the congregation in Corinth, is the fact that they lived in a status-based culture. It was a patron/client system --- like the rungs on a ladder. You were beholden to those who were above you, and you had expectations from those who were beneath. Each had an obligation to someone lower, each had someone above to whom they were responsible. This was the expectation for everyone, from slave to the peak of authority. Even the Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, mused that even he was responsible to the gods. The search for status consumed them. A great deal of care was taken to nurture and cultivate one’s patrons. The power received was then carefully distributed to one’s own clients, and so on and so on down the ladder. Indebtedness and obligation were the very fabric of the culture.

How perplexing it must have been for these people who were competing for status—who were trying to do things as best they could, going along to get along -- to come up against the claims of the gospel. After all, they were only playing the game by the rules as they understood them. They knew how the world works: they were looking out for their own interests, the interests of their families, communities, friends. They were looking for security in the ways that worked for them – through status, power, success, wealth, access, privilege, education, well-placed connections (sound familiar?) How absurd to give one’s heart to a God who crashes head on with these social and cultural conventions of power. A convicted felon from nowhere Nazareth is not the one that anyone who had a clue would choose to follow. Foolishness indeed!

But Paul writes:

God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. He asserts that this man, this teacher from Galilee, who went to his death on a cross on a Friday afternoon, is the very sign and story of the faithfulness of God’s love. *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.

I think it is appropriate to take a moment to empathize with this struggling group of people – this early house church in Corinth – and take away, for a while, the judgement we tend to place on them because of their squabbings, the concerns that don't seem like all too critical to us in our time and place (head coverings? Who baptized whom – does it matter?) I would like to take a deep breath and give thanks for them (like Paul!) for the incredible courage and above all – **imagination** – it took for them to see, in Christ, what God was doing, what God continues to do, and what God invites and empowers them to do... amidst all that seems to point to the contrary. A God, who C. S. Lewis called “the great iconoclast, who shatters our ideas about God time and time again.”

Would we have been so perceptive? So responsive to this yes – foolish sounding -- message? That God has come to us in Jesus Christ, that God entered into the sufferings of this world and was faithful to us even so far as to be put to death by the evils and sins of humankind. And that God, the God of the covenant, was faithful still.... redeeming the world -- delivering Jesus from the power of death, and as Paul says: “giving us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (15:57)

I think of that temple up on the summit – that the congregation walked by every day, that sign of power and prestige that they, somehow, turned away from. Paul told them in this letter that their own body is a temple “a temple of the Holy Spirit.” Paul said: “a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own.” (6:19) You belong –you belong -- to Christ.

It is easy to judge them... but we, too, know how to play the game. We too are surrounded by the things that signify and confer power and status. There's the bigger houses, the bigger cars. The prestigious schools. Well-funded retirements. Great health insurance. Safer neighborhoods. Larger bank accounts. Who doesn't thrill at the number of friends we have on facebook? We assess our worth by the number of likes on our social media accounts. We even know what status and “earthly wisdom” looks like on a grander scale: nations with more deadly weapons, militaries, access to and control of natural resources.

We know. We know.

Yet Paul's words continue to call out to us:

*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.*

Buechner writes:

To pray for your enemies, to worry about the poor when you have enough worries of your own, to start becoming yourself fully by giving of yourself prodigally to whoever needs you, to love your neighbor when an intelligent fourth-grader could tell you that the way to get ahead in the world is to beat your neighbors to the draw every chance you get --- that was what this God asked, Paul wrote. That was who this God was. That was who Jesus was. (p. 199)

Paul, throughout his letter, wrote with insight and vision about God, Christ, about God's love in our lives. He told them, Love is patient, love is kind. (13:4); You are the body of Christ and individually members of it (12:27), be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord (15:58). Hold fast to the gospel. Hold fast.

Those words to the early church are ours as well, we who also struggle, who try to live as foolish ones in the world, holding fast to Christ's sacrificial love shown in the cross. We gather, not with earthly signs of status and success, not with armies and might, not with regal processions and favors bestowed by the powerful. Our God does not confer honor or glory, but instead invites us to be guests, friends, at a meal. We, like the church in Corinth, gather to eat, to share in a meal – the Lord's Supper. Over 2000 years ago they gathered. And Paul wrote to them about it, giving them the words that we still say this day when we sit together at this table. In this feast, we proclaim that God is still faithful. Still equipping God's people for their work of love in the world. Jesus gives of his body, pours out his life for us and says take and eat, this is the way, do this. Remember me. And we, in our faith and in our doubt, together with those from every time and place -- proclaim those words of foolishness – of profound grace and hope – as we say together: *Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.*

The foolishness of God.

“What a daring expression this is of Paul's” says the poet/theologian J. Barrie Shepherd.

“From the point of view of this world –
with its falseness, its failures upon failures
compounded over many generations, its violence and fear,
callousness and greed – the way of the cross,
of self-sacrificial love, is foolishness indeed.
But... (we) can perceive another world:
an alternative to all the sad betrayals,
shoddy compromises of the past; a fairer, truer,
realm where love fulfills itself in selflessness
and joy is born wherever life is shared.”

Let his words be our prayer:

“Teach (us) such foolishness, Lord God,
And fit (us) for your world which is to be.

POST SCRIPT

(and because I know you were wondering: that general outline of the letters of Paul, yes, in this letter to the Corinthians, Timothy does get mentioned. Take a look to see if he says hi.)

References:

Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*, 2006, HarperCollins
J. Barrie Shepherd, *A Pilgrim's Way*, 1989, Westminster/John Knox
New Interpreter's Bible: Commentary Volume X, 2002, Abingdon Press
Ken Kovacs, sermon The Concern of God, February 25, 2024