

1 Corinthians 1:18-31 (Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany—Series A)

“Preaching Foolishness”

Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Enfield, CT

January 29, 2023

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text is the Epistle reading recorded in 1 Corinthians 1:

¹⁸For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it stands written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the understanding of the intelligent I will thwart.” ²⁰Where is the 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 was pleased through the foolishness of preaching to save those who believe. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ who stands crucified, a cause of offense for the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For the foolishness of God is wiser than people and the weakness of God is stronger than people. ²⁶Consider, then, your calling, brothers, that not many were wise according to the flesh, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose the foolish things of the world so that He might shame the strong, ²⁸and God chose the insignificant things of the world and the things that are despised, things that are not, so that He might make nothing that things that are, ²⁹so that all flesh would not boast before God. ³⁰And from Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom from God for you, both righteousness and holiness and redemption, ³¹so that just as it stands written, “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

I think that it is safe to say that, in our world and in our culture, no one really likes foolish and weak things. Nobody wants a cell phone or a tablet or a wi-fi network that is a technical weakling. We want fast and efficient—lots of memory, lots of power, lots of speed. But just check out some news stories and social media. These are filled with people doing foolish things that cause many of us with a shred of common sense to shake our heads in disbelief. Of course, there is a bit of subjectivity with foolishness. What’s foolish to one person isn’t always rated on the same level of foolishness by another. But be that as it may, there are many things that we could all agree upon as just plain foolish—sticking

your head in an alligator's mouth, posting pictures of yourself while you are driving, and a myriad of other things that would be inappropriate even to mention.

Yet, human wisdom is still where it is all at for our world. Think about what the combined forces of human reason and intellect can accomplish. People can make super computers that are so small we carry them around in our pockets. The medical arts can bring healing to sick and hurt bodies. Meteorologists can predict, with some degree of accuracy, the path of storms. Engineers construct safer vehicles and buildings. And it all makes good sense. Humanity has an understanding of how things in the world and our bodies are supposed to work. It's all very rational and logical. And that's a good thing. Human reason is a gift from God to be used to serve the Lord and our fellow humanity.

But with all of our collective wisdom and knowledge and understanding, there is something that people have not been able to get rid of or put an end to. That is death. The best that the medical arts can do is prolong human life, but it cannot save it. All people will die. The best built cars and buildings are only so safe, but not 100% safe. The wisdom of the world cannot stop death from happening.

It was God who decided from before the creation of the world to defeat death. God chose to save His fallen, sinful human creatures from eternal death and hell. But He did not go about it in a way that makes sense to human logic and reason. God, in His fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, chose that His One-of-a-Kind Son, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, should become flesh and dwell among the very humanity that is subject to death because we have sinned by what we have done and what we have left undone. Now what god have you ever read or heard about that wants to become human and pay for the

wrongs that people do and think and say? The world cries out, "That's foolishness! That's crazy! What kind of a god would do such a thing as that? Gods punish and pour out fire and lightning from heaven against bad people. Save them? It doesn't make any sense."

Imagine God the Father posting this on His social media page: "I'm sending my Son to be born in human flesh in order to save the people of the world from death. He will be born of a Jewish virgin named Mary in the days of Caesar Augustus in the village of Bethlehem. He will be named Jesus because He will save His people. When He is 33 years old, He will be betrayed by one of His own followers into the hands of His enemies. They will hold a trial against Him and find Him guilty of being "the King of the Jews." He will be crucified on a Roman cross, nailed there to suffer, to bleed, and to die in place of all humanity. Jesus will be the once-for-all, perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world that will forever rescue people from sin and its punishment of death."

People would probably read that message from God and their heads would shake back and forth. "Utter foolishness! It's totally irrational that God the Son would die to rescue His human creatures from the punishment of death and hell! God can't die! Who ever heard of such an absurd thing? And if He could, why do it for His enemies?" That's precisely the point! God, in sending His Son Jesus to suffer and to die on a cross in the place of sinners, did a shocking and amazing thing just as He promised He would do in the pages of Isaiah the prophet: "Therefore I will again do an amazing thing for these people—an absolutely extraordinary deed. Wise men will have nothing to say, the sages will have no explanations." (Isaiah 29:14 NET)

At the cross, the wisdom and power of God were made known. God did the absolutely extraordinary deed of winning forgiveness of sins and defeating death through the very death of Jesus and His Easter Day resurrection from the dead. What human wisdom, intellect, and reason could never, ever accomplish—the salvation of people from sin and the power of death—God **did** through His Son, true God and true Man, Jesus Christ. And He did it, wonder of wonders, through a substitutionary death on a cross. Christ Jesus is the power and the wisdom of God who took our sins upon Himself and suffered the full wrath and anger of God and the punishment of death in our place. Thus, we are saved from our sins through Jesus' blood-bought forgiveness. Where there is forgiveness, there is also eternal life and salvation, and no death!

What do you mean no death? People die all the time. Christians die all the time! We just laid a brother in Christ to rest last week. Yes, until the Crucified and Risen Lord Jesus returns on the last day, physical death will affect us all. While it is true that Christians are saved from their sins, physical death still remains in our future. But that physical death has lost its power. That death does not condemn us to hell and eternal separation from God. Our death, because of the work of Jesus for us, is the gate to life in heaven with Christ until the day of the resurrection when death forever is defeated when our bodies are raised, and we enter into the new creation. Jesus promises in John 5, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (John 5:24 ESV).

Through our Baptism into Christ, by grace through faith, we who believe in Jesus have already come into possession of eternal life. Death no longer has power over us.

When our body dies, we fall asleep in Christ—our souls at once with Him in Paradise, our bodies laid to rest in the grave to await our bodily resurrection on the Last Day. St. Paul, later in 1 Corinthians, would write these words for us by the power of the Holy Spirit, “When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:54–57 ESV).

It was the weak thing and the foolish thing in the eyes of the world that God did at the cross with the death of His Son that won forgiveness and eternal life for all who would believe in Him. The saving work of Jesus accomplished what centuries of human wisdom and reason could not. That’s why the message of the cross on which Jesus suffered and died, shedding His blood for humanity, though foolish to some, is in reality the power of God for salvation. And through the gift of faith in this Gospel message, we believe and trust that this “foolish thing” of God saves us from eternal death and hell. It is the work of Christ in His death on the cross and in His resurrection that forgives, rescues, and saves us. And while it isn’t humanly logical or perhaps even reasonable, faith clings to it as true wisdom, true life, the gift of God for the people of God.

Built on the water, Venice, Italy, has canals instead of streets and gondolas in place of cars. Each year tourists come to wonder at the beauty of that place and to visit ancient buildings that speak of stability and firmness in spite of being built over water and sand. The secret to their enduring quality? They were built long before the days of poured

concrete pilings, which make it possible to erect skyscrapers and span rivers today. The early Venetians discovered a wood that grew harder and more enduring with time. They laid down great numbers of these to establish their city. A wooden cross whose shaft was sunk on Calvary's hill is the foundation upon which our victory over death is built. It was the wisdom and power of God that planted that cross so that Jesus could die on it as the Savior of all people from sin and death. That cross has lost none of its enduring qualities with the passage of time. It is still the symbol of the only hope of salvation for humanity because on a cross of wood so many years ago, God the Son, Jesus died for you and me. Such a foolish thing to the world. But to us who are being saved it is the very power of God. Amen.