

Sermon Notes for 1/29/17 (Epiphany 4)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Theme: CROSS OF FOLLY, CROSS OF WEAKNESS

The Point: God has made a dying and rising Jesus the center of His saving work, even though the cross seems foolish to those who are perishing.

Introduction: I don't think it was at Concordia University, but an angel appears at a faculty meeting and tells the dean that in return for his unselfish and exemplary behavior, the Lord will reward him with his choice of infinite wealth, infinite wisdom or infinite beauty. Without hesitating, the dean selects infinite wisdom. "Done!" says the angel, and disappears in a cloud of smoke and a bolt of lightning. Now, all heads turn toward the dean, who sits surrounded by a faint halo of light. At length, one of his colleagues whispers, "Say something in your new-found wisdom." The dean looks at them and says, "I should have taken the money." That story makes us laugh because it is so true about human wisdom – it leans in the direction of human acquisition and material happiness. Not so with God's wisdom!

God's wisdom often points in some unusual directions. It counters our human wisdom. It calls for actions that often seem foolish to those who are not directed by God's Spirit. Even otherwise saintly and holy men shrink from its folly. Moses receives instructions, "Speak to the rock and it will yield water." Instead, he hits it. Jonah hears the call: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and cry out against it." He heads to Tarshish.

But the Spirit's folly does bring some harvest. Jesus yells out to some fishing disciples, "Throw your net on the other side of the boat, and you will catch some." And they do! Paul writes to Corinth, "Throw that sinner out of the church so that he might come to his senses and be saved." And they do it, and he is rescued. The Spirit testifies that with bread and wine we receive this day the very body and blood of a once-crucified, but now risen and conquering Lord. "How foolish!" many may say. Our human wisdom desires to sit in judgment of God's truths. They don't make sense to our minds.

People are perishing due to their self-centered ways. In fact, all of us have been infected with this disease of selfishness, self-directedness and self-interest. This is the root cause of all brokenness in this world, this desire to watch out for #1 (namely, ME). Go back to Adam and Eve. They lived in perfect bliss and joy as they lived under God's blessing and within His will. But Satan worked on them to get them to doubt God and to trust their own evaluation more than God's clear Word. "Did God really say . . .?"

And how often we are led to think the same thing! "Did God really say, 'Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?'" "Did God really say, 'Love your neighbor as yourself?'" "Did God really say, 'Blessed are the pure in heart . . . Blessed are the peacemakers?'" "Wouldn't I be better off following the mantra 'Every man for himself?'" "Wouldn't it be safer not to turn the other cheek or to act in meekness or to show mercy to those who threaten me?" Man's ways work in opposition to God's plans.

The world prizes signs and wisdom – two things that work against the Gospel. "Jews demand signs," writes Paul. The Jews had been given many signs through the centuries. Those were embedded in the Old Testament. Besides Moses bringing water from the rock, Aaron's rod turns to a snake, the Red Sea turns into a strolling path, Elijah and Elisha raise children from the dead, Gideon defeats the huge Midianite army with 300 men, the shadow goes backward on Hezekiah's steps, 185,000 Assyrians are put to death in one night by the destroying angel. But there always seemed to be a hunger and a thirst for more signs. It is easy to mistake the sign for the substance, to hunger for manna rather than the Giver of the manna. That was the Jewish dilemma.

On the other hand (as Paul puts it), “Greeks desire wisdom.” The Greeks saw the attainment of wisdom and knowledge as the highlight of life. Philosophers made their living dispensing wisdom to their followers. The one who could overcome in debates was seen as the superior person. Boasting of our own strength and wisdom leads to disunity and a spirit of contentiousness. Stumbling over the cross is the inevitable result of such value being put upon signs and/or wisdom.

What we think we are is reduced to nothing in God’s evaluation. Hear Paul’s words again: “For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’ 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?” God brings judgment on the world’s way of thinking and living, the way that tries to do without Him. Those who imagine themselves wise in their own eyes end up being the most foolish of all, for they miss the very essence of life and being. Life does not consist in getting more signs or attaining more wisdom or having the most toys. Life is found in something very different. Life is found in relationship with the eternal God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Last Tuesday, January 24, 2017, was the 30th anniversary of the introduction of the Macintosh computer. By all accounts Steve Jobs was a visionary, and spurred on by that vision he built a successful computer company. But Jobs soon discovered that, if his vision was to reach fruition, the company needed greater management expertise. So Jobs approached John Sculley, then President of PepsiCo. There was absolutely no reason that Sculley could see why he should leave a highly-paid position in a world-leading company to work with a bunch of computer nerds in a fledgling industry. Not unsurprisingly, he turned Jobs down. But Jobs wouldn’t take no for an answer. He approached Sculley again. Again Sculley turned him down.

In a last-ditch effort, Jobs passionately presented his visionary ideas to Sculley. He asked Sculley a vital question. “Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water or do you want a chance to change the world?” Sculley was sold! Indeed Jobs and Sculley did change the world, at least when it comes to computing and electronics. Jesus comes to us with the same question: “Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water or do you want a chance to change the world?” Most of us spend our lives making sugared water, going to work to accumulate more possessions and perhaps finding a little space for God and the world in our spare time. But Jesus had a vision to change the world. His is the vision of the kingdom of God and he calls us to place it at the center of our lives, to make it our reason for existence: “Seek first the kingdom of God” (Matthew 6.33).

Christ crucified, the cruciform Savior, who does not conform to worldly standards, has become the source of salvation for Jews and Greeks alike. The preaching of this Gospel message brings power to bear. Though it seems that Jesus is defeated on Good Friday, His seeming defeat becomes God’s power to save. And the preaching of this message brings the power of God’s Spirit to bear on human lives. Paul puts it this way: “God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.” It appears to be foolishness as the world would see it. Why would we imagine that the preaching of a condemned and crucified Rabbi should be God’s way to rescue people from sin and death?

Jesus appears to be the Victim as He is led away carrying that crossbeam on which He would be suspended. He is tortured, tormented, beaten, mocked, humiliated like the worst sinner in history. And in God’s eyes that is what He becomes, in order that we might be set free from sin’s guilt and power. God has turned things on their head. Arms once outstretched to receive the nails now embrace the world of sinners. Or as the hymn puts it, “The head that once was crowned with thorns is crowned with glory now. A royal diadem adorns the mighty Victim’s brow.”

Confucius once said, “By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.” Christ learned

wisdom and obedience by His experience of suffering. Now we also learn His wisdom through our experience of living by faith in His promises.

The crucified Jesus has become for us “wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” Here is the full life that is found nowhere else but in Jesus. We are made wise in Jesus, wise in ways that speak to eternity. We are made righteous in Jesus, for by faith in Him God accounts us to be totally innocent of any and every sin or wrongdoing. We are sanctified in Jesus, set apart for new life that gives evidence of holiness in its service to the least and the lost. We are redeemed by Jesus, purchased from our old lives of slavery to sin and Satan, set free to live forever. Jesus is everything, we are nothing.

We now are encouraged to boast in the Lord. We do not boast in signs – whether those signs indicate the increase or the decrease of the nation, whether those signs seem to predict the success or the failure of the institutional church, whether those signs point to our strength or to our weakness. We do not seek wisdom except that which is embodied in the cross-bearing Savior. He gives His life for the life of the world. That simple message is the wisdom of God.

We serve as those who enact the shape of the cross in our lives, for the sake of others who do not yet know Jesus as the cruciform Savior. That cross shape reaches from heaven to earth as God descends to bear our sin and shame. That cross shape also reaches sideways, from person to person, as we live out the wisdom of God by our service of our neighbor. “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; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.” If you think you don’t amount to much, be thankful that such a reality qualifies you for God’s work within you.

We do not need to pretend we are something we are not. If we are deemed foolish because we hold to God’s truth above the world’s pronouncements, we need not be concerned. If we are weak in the face of the world’s strength and control and pre-eminence, we do not need to fret. If we are considered the lowest of the low by those who think they know the ultimate truth without reference to God, then we welcome their hatred and persecution, for this is the same road the prophets before us have walked.

John Wooden had a saying: “Talent is God given. Be humble. Fame is man-given. Be grateful. Conceit is self-given. Be careful.” You and I do not need to boast of things that impress men. Instead, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” We can praise and thank Him for all that He has done to make us His own. We have been called by God, though we may be weak and foolish and despised, and in that truth we boast in Him! What we could never do, Jesus has done, including keeping God’s will perfectly and dying to bear our sin and our punishment. What we could never be, Jesus has made us, so that we live in Him forever.

Conclusion: God has made a dying and rising Jesus the center of His saving work, even though the cross seems foolish to those who are perishing. As we serve those around us, we are living out the cruciform-shaped life that marked our Savior, and we are coming to know more and more the foolishness of God, which is wiser than man’s wisdom. Jesus guarantees it! AMEN!