

Foolishness
Menno Mennonite Church
November 8, 2020

Purpose: To claim the basic claim of faith in the Cross as the way of Christ.

Message: As attractive as we find the wisdom of effectiveness, we are called time and again to the way of the cross as the sole way of the kingdom.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:17-25

Synopsis: These are days seeking of wisdom. We are looking, often, for the best way forward through the challenges that lie in front of us. We are seeking our way through the challenges of the moment by the best way possible. It is a temptation to think that there is an easy way through and the best way forward. More so, we are invited time and again to proclaim our allegiance to the moment and movement that makes sense to us.

Yet we are time and again called back to the one thing that ever made sense: the cross of Jesus Christ. This is not the sense of logic and of power, but of the deeper knowledge of the love of God who calls us together in faith that transforms even the worst of the world into the instrument of salvation.

1 Corinthians 1:17-25

¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize,
but to preach the gospel

—not with wisdom and eloquence,
lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ For it is written:
“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.” ¹

²⁰ Where is the wise person?

Where is the teacher of the law?

Where is the philosopher of this age?

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

²¹ For since in the wisdom of God
the world through its wisdom did not know him,

God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached
to save those who believe.

²² Jews demand signs and
Greeks look for wisdom,

²³ but we preach Christ crucified:
a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,

²⁴ but to those whom God has called,
both Jews and Greeks,
Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom,
and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Sometimes it is unavoidable: you are going to look like a fool. Like the time that I went on a day airplane trip from Manitoba to Saskatchewan for a days work doing my IT consulting. A mere 1 hour flying time gives you a solid 12 hour work day before you have to come back. Getting up at an hour where I generally try to live through with my eyes closed if at all possible, I did what I had to do and rushed out of the house to the airport. I made it to the airport, through the lines and all the way to the gate where, in Canada, they check ID for the first time before realizing that I left my wallet on the counter at home.

Fortunately, I had my passport tucked away in my computer bag, so I could fly, but I couldn't do a whole lot else. The nice people at Hertz knew I had a credit card—I had a picture of it to show them—but they were having none of it. I ended up calling up my colleague and leaning on him for some cash where he could meet me with the cab fare. But there is nothing to make a good, professional first impression like showing up without any way to survive the day. Hello; I am Bryce and I am a bonehead.

We go to great lengths to avoid the appearance of being foolish. We will hide, equivocate, officiate and just outright avoid the situation is there is something involved to make us look less than what we would like to appear to be. Sometimes, it is the avoidance techniques themselves that make us look that much sillier.

We want to be cool, calm, collected, rationally working our way through the world by the most efficient means possible. The one who makes the least waves, offers the least vulnerability, and wins the most arguments wins the way within the world. We do this in our lives. We do this within our faith; even more so. Because let's face it; faith and the life it demands of us does not make rational sense by the ways of the world. There is a vast amount of painful experience to argue that Loving one's enemies is not an effective strategy for personal safety. We know way too many times where being an ethical, moral person, is not the most profitable way to be. The list goes on and on. At times we need to be honest about the nature of faith being just that—stuff that is believed to be true without empirical evidence to verify its efficacy. We are insulated from the fuller impact of this. We exist in a culture where the basics of Christianity have at least a basic comprehension; at least that has been the case. But the foolishness is there. Have you ever considered the words of institution for Communion—this is by body broken, my blood shared—in the absence of any context of what is going on, as if someone were listening outside the window? We sound like a rather sketchy cult at best. At worst the Donner party.

The list keeps going. At the end of the day, is there much surprise that evangelism is as hard as it is, and getting harder all the time?

That is where you usually turn to someone like me. I have studied, read, considered and become A THEOLOGIAN; the one who, by making a study of something is supposed to make it make more sense. Never mind that such an idealized goal rarely happens; most of the time we just good at making it *sound* like it makes good logical sense by speaking about it in a way that makes no sense what so ever. As we have discussed, the life of faith is not always the most logical of choices, and can be harder still when we try to apply our faith to a world that seldom wants to cooperate with the way that we might see it. Try though we might—and we keep on doing so over and over again—the life of faith does not make good sense in the world.

If we are looking for a way of life to market here, Christianity really could use some re-branding. Which is exactly what we do. We clean up Jesus, clean up the way of discipleship to make it less offensive for general consumption, and less demanding of us. We try to make our good news of salvation from the way of life as it is sound less foolish than what it really is. Today, though, I am going suggest something radical. I think we need to embrace the foolishness—right up front.

Because when we hide the basic truths of the incredible elements of our faith, we rob it of its power. The more we try to make it make sense, to explain the cross and Christ upon it, the less we end up being shaped by it and the further away from the true nature of faith we wander.

We lose, I think, what Paul is on about here, and what is making him most passionate for the people he was writing to back in Corinth. We are always painting Paul as the company man, the one who sets up and supports the status quo, but that's only because that is the purpose to which he has been put over the centuries. Yet, I am not always convinced that this is really what Paul is all about. I think he is, first and foremost, a single minded missionary, needing to achieve his end at whatever cost. This is a prime example that can give you that feeling—Paul's letter the church at Corinth.

When Paul left Corinth, he left a church where the message was that you are all one person, all one body, all one social unit. And that was radical for this time and place. We think we have social stratification—we have nothing on Corinth and the Roman Empire. Corinth was a city which was about as worldly and decadent as they came. Sitting on two sea ports, the world was their oyster, and they had all the cosmopolitan comforts and expectations that great

civilizations imply. There is stratification, power, and separation and never shall that be questioned.

So as this Jesus movement takes root in Corinth, it is a big departure from what is. They are taught you are all one, you each one matter to God not by status or virtue but by grace alone. After Paul's departure, it was not long before the sensibilities of this city began to seep their way into the cracks of the church and do its damage. Paul eventually responds with a letter, a kind of grocery list of infractions against the gospel. Christians in Corinth had begun committing immoral acts. They were suing each other and refusing to eat together at the Lord's Supper. The unity of the body was being threatened and it was up to Paul to remind them of the Kingdom wisdom into which they had been baptized. He begins this task in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 and ultimately concludes in his famous chapter on love (1 Corinthians 13). Time and again he asks them to think of others. Over and over he asks them to give up their privilege. Over and over, he invites them into all the foolishness that is the life of Christ. You cannot read chapter 12 and 13 all about the one body and the one mind, the greatness of love without knowing that this is not happening at all in the context to whom he is writing.

The words here he uses are telling too. To the outsider, Paul insists, proclaiming Christ crucified is sheer folly (*moria* in the Greek). In today's language, we might say that this message could only appeal to a group of "morons." For the Hellenes this was clearly nonsense. Ultimate truth, they argued, must necessarily rise above the flux of nature. The gods are a force outside the world to be worshiped, not in the world to be lived with the clearly lined spaces between this world and the next. Similarly, the Jews had their own stumbling block. For centuries they had sought from their prophets signs that the day of the messiah was imminent. By the first century this apocalyptic hope had taken a number of forms: the messiah would be a heavenly figure coming on the clouds; he would be a warrior king; the messiah would be a priest. Jesus of Nazareth was none of these. Indeed, he was a man cursed, as all people executed publicly are under God's curse according to the law of Moses (Deuteronomy 21:23). To proclaim this as hope and deliverance was not only foolish; it was blasphemy.¹

It was this to this that Paul invites the readers, both today and then, to the life and faith. There is foolishness, he seems to say, but only because the way of God, the way of the cross is so other as to be laughable from the outside looking in. Yet when we time and again come and embrace the love of God, we are invited into this foolishness time and again.

I think we need to be reminded of this basic truth from time to time. When we want the way of God to make sense, perhaps—just perhaps—we are trying too hard. Maybe we would be better served to release the policies and practices of how stuff get done, as important as that is, and remind ourselves of the way of the cross and of Christ crucified. This is the way that holds no person beyond the pale, no situation as beyond hope, and no reality as beyond the redemption of God. We do well to embrace that what we do and who we are called to be is not necessarily supposed to make sense in the logical, effective, outcome based way that we are used to. Rather we do well to remember the when the Spirit of the living God is involved, all bets are off.

The good news is this: that God's way is not the way of the world and regardless the season, it is God's way of love and compassion that will rule at the end of the day. This is the only truth that matters at the end of the day, and the only hope that is of substance, no matter how you feel about this week.

It is often said that the work of the church is time and again to proclaim "Christ has arisen" week in, week out; season in, season out. From that basic proclamation comes the myriad ways that that statement comes to live, steer and move us from day to day. May we each know fully the foolishness of our faith, embrace it fully, even as we find our voice to declare "the Lord has risen indeed."