

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25. 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent. **March 8, 2015.**

Grace, mercy, peace... and *power!* These are all yours because of Christ – who was CRUCIFIED for you! Amen.

This morning I'd like to try something a little different – OK? I saw my wise friend Brock try this once – and Brock is my real friend; he's not the President of Madagascar or anything☺ So, if you would, please just play along... and do as I do. First: I'd like you to start by taking your hand... now, make a #1 sign and put it in front of your face, like this. Go ahead, everybody! Alright, now open your hand and turn it toward your face, like this. Now... being careful of those around you—and if you're able to—I want you to move your hand around your head, like this, in a sort of sweeping motion... front... back. Ok, now wiggle your fingers as you do it. ... GOOD: you can put your hands down.

Well... thank you for very much for participating in this experiment... **but you all looked ridiculous!** You should have seen yourselves. Just... so incredibly **foolish!** Did you feel kinda **foolish?** Did you think, "Why is this kid making me do this? I'm in no mood to feel **foolish** this morning!"

You know, this sensation of *feeling foolish* is truly something that the Apostle Paul talks about in our sermon lesson for today. After all, he writes:

***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.***

Yes... **we preach Christ crucified!** And we take this message quite seriously.

The world may say *too seriously*. The world sees the cross and scoffs. "That's pretty dumb."

We can really only smile back and say, "Christ crucified means *serious power*. It means Christ's power is ours. Power to *save*. *Power to save us all*. Seriously.

My friends, that is some serious wisdom.

But *good luck* telling that to most Corinthians, Jews, even Madisonians.

First the Corinthians to whom Paul wrote at least two lengthy letters. It's helpful to know that the Christian congregation at Corinth was like Paul's "problem child." You see, the Corinthians had so much talent, so much to offer; yet from the beginning the Corinthian church was deeply flawed. One glaring flaw was the division between different pastors. Basically, the Corinthians played favorites. "*Who was the most gifted preacher?*" "*Who was the coolest?*" – Back in Paul's day, that meant whoever was able to craft the best arguments, whoever was able to use rhetoric and logic to convince and to persuade the listener. You see, Greek culture prized philosophy, so it just made sense, then, that whoever could summon the spirit and speech of, say, Socrates, and Plato and so PROVE their teaching, well then, THIS was best. THIS... was the height of human wisdom!

This was the *Greek way*. The Gentile way! No wonder the message of the cross didn't exactly seem to scream "WISDOM." Just imagine: "You're tellin' me that *my sin is really that bad* that I would actually *need God* to do that much for me? And you're sayin' that all of my good works, *not even my own humility*... they won't contribute an ounce *toward my salvation*? So you're tellin' me that I, a GENTILE, have to go to a JEW to be saved? And this JEW, who died shamefully, in weakness, *on a cross*, is my SAVIOR? And this SAVIOR, was a *divine being*... who DIED? And God killed his own Son instead of those who actually deserve it? And then three days later, you're tellin' me, *he rose to life?!?* And perhaps craziest of all, you're tellin' me that God freely forgives me for NOTHING?

Yeah, when you look at the message of the cross, it certainly seems like **foolishness**, doesn't it? There's nothing impressive about it. Sometimes, I think Christianity is sort of like Grandma's really good casserole. You see it there, in the dish, and you say, "*What is THAT?!?*" It looks awful to eat... "*did a first-grader make this with half a recipe?*" All this talk, but did you actually try the casserole? See how it tastes; perhaps you'll be surprised...

... but you could never convince the Greeks. And the Gentile Corinthians weren't the only ones to ever reject the message of the cross. Jesus' own people – *the Jews* – were doing the same thing. Paul writes:

***Jews demand signs.***

God's chosen people didn't go for *wisdom*. They didn't care about being argued into having faith. Instead, they wanted to be *wowed* by displays of *POWER*! This Jewish expectation dated back to the Exodus days when God sent crazy plagues and parted the Red Sea, to the Ten Commandments when the LORD literally thundered on a mountain. And it continued to Jesus' day, when the Jews came to him and said, "*Rabbi, show us a sign from heaven.*" Think "water-into-wine" or "*get up and walk!*" The Jews wanted the *MIRACLES*, not *THE MESSAGE*. Jesus could preach and teach all he wanted, but it was just, "*Yeah yeah yeah, whatever Jesus... just show us some miracles – then we'll listen.*"

Those goofy Greeks. Mongering for wisdom like the latest fashion.

Those hypocritical Jews. Always looking for fancy fireworks, never satisfied with the *WORD* itself.

***"God, give me a sign!"***

Even though *WE KNOW* they were wrong... even though the cross of Christ is prominent at Resurrection in Verona, Wisconsin, U.S.A., 2015... don't we also sometimes treat the cross like weak foolishness? Don't you and I often minimize God's Word like it's nothing close to relevant or applicable, let alone ***wise*** or ***powerful***?

In fact, the mere mention of the name Jesus has an almost roach-scattering effect, it seems. It's like... everybody's having fun and then someone drops the boom of "JESUS CHRIST CRUCIFIED"... and all goes quiet. "*We would rather not talk about Christ crucified today... but thank you.*" It doesn't feel like a happy thing. It's such a weak, ghastly symbol of an ole-timey crutch of a religion.

Whether it's *pride*... or *fear*... or *politically-correctness*... am I alone to think that the cross may seem especially foolish *in Madison*? I'll admit: I've been inside bars and cafés on State Street or near the capitol, and suddenly... I feel *small*, as if I'm a fragile fool who's a few steps behind. I'm not *smart*. I'm not *open-minded*! My faith doesn't feel strong; in fact, it feels ***foolish!***

*Did God really say marriage is between ONE MAN and ONE WOMAN?*

*Did God really say if I get ANGRY at one person, it's as punishable as if I KILLED that person?*

*But what if it's that clueless coworker?*

*What if it's that partisan politician with whom I, well... disagree?!?*

This is the well-worn path that human wisdom travels, in its attempt to replace the wisdom... *of God*. "*Did God really say...*" It's so easy to forget about **THE WORD**, right? Even easier to forget about that steady message of the cross that is all over the pages of God's Word. Instead, we think we need *whatever we think we need*. And THAT is the definition of *weak foolishness*.

In his great wisdom, God did not trust us to save ourselves. He would not witness a complete train wreck of human proportions. In his *WISDOM*, God did not invent salvation like an extravagant math problem or some mysterious formula to be solved or discovered by the only the world's wisest man. "*Well, maybe if just do this... then I can be immortal...*" "*Or if I could leave a sort of legacy, then that way I'll get to heaven.*" At each path, God says, "NOPE – DEAD END." "NOPE – DEAD END." ***For it is written:***

***"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;***

***the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."***

And Paul continues:

***"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 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."***

***God saved us by HIS wisdom, because THAT is exactly what we needed.***

So NO – nothing that we do contributes to our salvation. And YES – we need as much help from God as we can get. YES – Jesus died a *shameful, foolish-looking death*, just like God *powerfully prophesied* that he would. YES – Jesus was a divine being who DIED – his blood was *powerful* enough to pay for the sins of the whole world. YES – God killed his OWN SON instead of guilty people, because that is the *POWER* of his love for us. YES – Jesus *powerfully* rose from the dead three days later. And YES – God freely credits his “foolish forgiveness” to us... all because of Jesus.

*Because... of CHRIST CRUCIFIED.*

*CHRIST CRUCIFIED is the serious but singular reason for our sins to BE GONE!*

So we have this message of *true wisdom* in Christ. Whether a Jew, a Greek, or a Belleville native... we truly have **GOD’S WISDOM**. *It is wrapped up in the foolishness... of the message... of the cross.*

Yet the world still sees it as *only foolishness* and nothing else!

*“Oh, if only we could convert the world! If only everyone were a Christian!”*

That’s where the *power* of God comes in. God never commanded us to twist arms for Christ. No person has ever argued another person into God’s kingdom. Yet God promises that a really-quiet-explosive *power* comes into our possession whenever we preach, and moreover, whenever we preach this: **CHRIST CRUCIFIED**. This is the Apostle Paul’s convincing creed and his definitive drumbeat *in the name of Christ*. Elsewhere Paul wrote a confirmation of the truth: ***Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ.***

Preach it! PREACH THE WORD!

This *power of God* never diminishes or loses its explosiveness after we share it with others. It doesn’t even require human arguments to go before and after it. We don’t even need miracles to clinch belief inside people’s hearts. *The power is simply found in the message of the cross of Christ*. The true power to turn a heart from “*Ah, that’s foolishness!*” to “*God really did that for me?*” is in that message of the cross. Even if someone laughs in your face – and someone probably will – don’t worry, just preach it! It’s not YOUR own message, but God’s.

What seems like the foolishness of God – well, that’s true wisdom.

And what seems like the weakness of God – well, that is true power.

Don’t take it personally or too seriously if *and when* someone thinks your “Christ crucified” is foolish. We don’t need to worry about any tense or awkward or angry moments. We can simply embrace every opportunity we have to preach CHRIST CRUCIFIED... so that the Holy Spirit can embrace that person’s heart with faith.

I’d like to conclude with another foolish experiment; it starts the same way, but this time I’d like you to repeat after me as well. So again put your hand in front of your face as a #1, and repeat after me:

**I am a Christian.** (I AM A CHRISTIAN.)

**And in his wisdom, God saved me.** (IN HIS WISDOM, GOD SAVED ME.)

*Hand motions downward to form “first part” of the cross*

... **I am a Christian.** (I AM A CHRISTIAN.)

**And I have a powerful message to proclaim.** (I HAVE A POWERFUL MESSAGE TO PROCLAIM.)

*Hand motions across to complete the sign of the cross.*

Amen.