

Foolish Wisdom

A Sermon on John 2:13-22 and 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ March 3, 2024

Are you fasting for the season of Lent, or perhaps abstaining from meat, perhaps just on Fridays? For the season of Lent, are you devoting a little extra time to prayer? I am not especially concerned about your answers to these questions. I can only guess that, given what Jesus said about food, Jesus would not be especially concerned about the food you are eating during the season of Lent.

The central question for us is, "Do we see we must be converted?" Are we willing, this year, this month, for some part of ourselves to be changed by God's action and grace? At the age of 26, 46, 66, or 96, are we able to learn something new? Are we able to see that we might be wrong about something? Are we willing to be converted?

We, at St. Paul's, are a lot like Paul's congregation in Corinth. Some of the members in the church at Corinth were well off, while others had just enough money to feed their families. Some of them were natives to Corinth; their families had lived there for many generations. Many were from other places. Some of them were highly educated, while others had little education.

But the biggest division in the church in Corinth was that some of them were proud, and some were humble. Some of the members understood they were in need of being converted, they were in need of being saved by God's grace, while other members thought the hard work was already finished. They thought conversion was something that happened several months or years ago. Some of them were quite sure they were very wise, and quite ready to critique other members of the community. Others were most sure of their need for God's forgiveness.

So Paul wrote to them and said, *The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are not followers of Christ, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. As the prophet Isaiah has 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? Several of the members were quite sure they were the ones with wisdom, they were the stars of the debate club.

So Paul responded to them, *Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since ... the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.*

You might be thinking Paul is picking on these two groups of people, the Jews and the Gentiles. Let's recall that Paul is always thinking dualistically, which has its drawbacks. But in this particular case it is helpful because we realize that when Paul says, *we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles*, he means the message of Christ crucified is a stumbling block to everyone.

Yes, Christ crucified is a stumbling block to many people. It appears that many people who claim to follow Christ have stumbled over the meaning of the cross. Some who claim the cross as their symbol have come to view the cross as a symbol of victory over one's political foes. On January 6, 2021 a group of them brought a large wooden cross with them as they joined a small army of people who attempted to overturn the election of Joe Biden as president of the United States.

Yes, Christ crucified is a stumbling block and foolishness to many people. On December 19, 2021 Donald Trump Jr. gave a speech at the Turning Point USA conference where he denounced the message of Christ Jesus. He said, "We've turned the other cheek, and I understand the biblical reference....but it's gotten us nothing. Okay? It's gotten us nothing while we've ceded ground in every major institution in our country."

But we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. The cross is foolishness to some, because, as Donald Trump Jr. would say, it's gotten us nothing. The message of the cross is foolishness to some, because the message of the cross is not about us winning. The message of the cross is not about us being right. The message of the cross is about God being right and us being wrong. The message of the cross is about us following Christ's example by giving up some part of ourselves.

The cross means giving up our confidence in thinking we are right and the other person is wrong. The cross means giving up the idea that I am in charge. The cross means giving up the idea that life is

about my success, my happiness, my fulfillment. The cross is foolishness to us, unless we have come to the understanding that I am the one who is foolish, that I am the one who must be converted, once again, by God's forgiveness and love.

We are constantly in need of being converted. That's true for us as it was for our ancestors. It was no different in Jesus' time.

It happened at the feast of the Passover. Jesus, along with all of the other Jews, went to Jerusalem, to the Temple. *In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"*

Like the people who carried the cross during their assault on our democracy, the people who had turned the Temple into a marketplace thought they were doing the right thing. The mistake they made was exactly the same. Like the self-proclaimed 'wise' Christians in Corinth, they were the bold, the strong, the proud.

We are constantly in need of being converted. This was true for Jesus' friends and neighbors. This is true for us. This will be true for our children and grandchildren.

I am often inspired by the young people in my life. I am inspired by the way the parents are helping the children learn to take responsibility for their actions. I am inspired by the way the parents are helping the children be fully themselves, as old expectations for the roles and behavior of girls and boys have fallen by the wayside. I have only one concern for these younger generations. Will they understand that, like us, they will always be in need of being converted?

In recent years our young people have played a vital role in leading the United States in a reexamination of our history, especially as it is expressed and remembered in public monuments and buildings. As part of this effort, 150 monuments to officers of the Confederate army have been removed from public parks and public spaces. Those of us gathering at St. Paul's Church, a few blocks away from the Jerry Rescue monument, might not know that more than 700 monuments to the Confederate cause were created in the years following the Civil War. We will never know exactly what was in the hearts and minds of those who used precious resources to erect monuments in honor of men who attempted to overthrow the United States government. My guess is that there was a strong unwillingness on their part to be converted to the idea that slavery should be abolished. My guess is that there was a strong unwillingness on their part to be converted to the idea that all men, and all women, were created equal.

Our children and grandchildren are playing a vital role in leading a full reexamination of our history, and this is a positive step for our nation. As the reexamination continues and broadens, I observe one characteristic that raises questions in my mind. I observe that at times there is an insistence that historical figures must be judged by present day standards; they will be judged by whether they adhered to 21st century understandings and values in their lifetimes. According to this view, if one of our ancestors made some mistakes they must be rejected as a role model. On these grounds, statues of George Washington and other central figures in American history are being removed.

I do not care much about whether some statues are removed. My concern is that every time a group of people becomes convinced that they are certainly right, and that others are certainly wrong, people get hurt. If our children and grandchildren come to the conclusion that they might be perfect, I am concerned for their spiritual well-being. I am concerned that in placing their trust in their own view of the world, in their own wisdom, they will become very confident, like the Christians in Corinth, and turn away from God's forgiveness and love.

During this season of preparation for Easter, which we call Lent, I encourage us to pay attention to the ideas and work of our hearts. It would be easier to make changes to things that are outside of us, such as our meals, or even the statues in the park. But God's concern is the more difficult terrain. God's desire is not for our food to be changed, but for us to be changed. God's desire is that we would let go of the many varieties of pride that fill our hearts and minds: resentments, anger, envy, and harsh judgments of others. God's desire is that we would accept God's forgiveness, and our need for forgiveness. God's desire is that we would put aside our imperfect wisdom, in order to live and flourish in the blessing of God's love.