

Epiphany-3-a2008

Mike Bennett

1 Corinthians 1.10-18

First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC

Matthew 4.12-23

Third Sunday after Epiphany

January 27, 2008

Holy Foolishness

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. —1 Corinthians 1.18

Let us pray: In all that we say and do, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen. (Congregation is seated.)

Today's Epistle lesson has played an important part in the history of Christian theology. It was a favorite of Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther. It has always been a passage that seems to have the capacity to *renew* the church—to call us back to our most basic understandings, to untangle us from the false “wisdoms” of the world. It is a passage that has always held great attraction to me personally. As a pastor in post-Christendom America, this passage helps me cope. When I look around

our culture and see so few people committed to the way of Jesus, I wonder if I'm just crazy to keep doing what I'm doing. Then I read this passage and realize that there is a certain kind of "craziness" that has biblical justification: the holy foolishness of the Christian gospel.

Paul tells the Corinthians that "the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing." We are not very accustomed to hearing the word foolishness in connection with the central symbol of our religion. Paul gets our attention, as he certainly got the attention of the Corinthians, by noting that the central tenant of Christianity seems foolish to many people. Most of us didn't come here to take part in foolishness, and we would like to think that coming to church makes us respectable people, respectable even among people who don't attend church themselves. Church attendance sort of goes along with being a pillar of the community. Or at least it did at one time—in the memory of most people here. Instead of reassuring us that, yes indeed, church-going is still a respectable activity, Paul points out to us that true Christianity might not be so respectable.

We don't know for sure, but perhaps the Corinthians had been adding many pretty flourishes to their religion—in order to make it more appealing to outsiders. Paul hints at the demands of those outsiders when he comments that,

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles... —1 Corinthians 1.22-23

“Jews demand signs”...because so many of the hopes of the ancient Jews were tied up with the idea of a political messiah—one who would come with mighty power to deliver them, Christ's death on the cross was extremely difficult to accept. It seemed to show weakness on the part of God instead of power, and so it kept many from believing. It was a stumbling block.

It is no different today. Christianity is not very good at pointing to worldly results. Christ does not seem to have conquered the world or begun a reign of love and peace. World history seems just as full of barbarism and evil after Christ as it was before. Those preoccupied with visible results seek signs, and Christ is a stumbling block.

“Greeks seek wisdom”...the ancient Greeks, on the other hand, were proud of their traditions of thought and their elaborate systems of philosophy. Paul came to Corinth preaching the simple message of Christ’s death and resurrection. To many of the sophisticated Greeks, this must have seemed hopelessly simple. What foolishness that a simple message about one person could be the true path to salvation... surely the true path to God would be more complicated. Those preoccupied with philosophy seek wisdom, and Christ is simplistic foolishness.

To both of these groups, it was the cross—the symbol of Christ’s death—that was the problem. The Corinthians had apparently begun to seek after leaders who could offer them more than the foolishness of the cross. Today, the cross is still a problem for us. We would rather seek after something more. Perhaps we would like a more positive, practical philosophy for living—one that promises results. Modern society offers many self-help movements that might be able to show better records of changing behavior and attitudes. Maybe it is riches that we seek.

Practitioners of a false “prosperity gospel” stand ready to enlist God in the process of making us rich. Or perhaps we would prefer a more stimulating intellectual challenge—time is short, we want to hear things that are interesting and fascinating. We get tired of hearing the same message about the cross again and again.

It seems to me that we are much like the “Jews and Greeks” that Paul knew in Corinth. We too have a difficult time seeing why God would choose to speak to the world by way of one who died on a cross. Paul argues for the necessity of the cross by trying to impress upon the Corinthians the limits of worldly wisdom. He begins by quoting the prophet Isaiah, and then continues on his own:

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? For since, in the
wisdom of God, the world did not know God through
wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our
proclamation, to save those who believe. (1.20-21)

Paul tells the Corinthians that the cross was not God’s first effort at speaking to human beings. By all rights, we should have been able to come to know God by merely looking around us. By contemplating the

wisdom of God in his works, in the created world, we should have been able to come to knowledge of God. But it did not happen that way. Instead of seeing God's handiwork in the world, we human beings were able to see only our own abilities. Instead of being driven to follow God's will, we choose to follow our own will. Overreaching pride has been the defining characteristic of human action throughout all time. And it always brings the same, devastating results.

According to Paul, it was because of human perverseness that God was unable to speak to us directly through worldly wisdom. As Calvin put it, "because the whole world learnt nothing at all from what God revealed of His wisdom in created things, He then set about teaching [people] in another way." Drastic measures were needed to show us the extent of God's love for us and the extent of God's identification with our predicament. The drastic measure God chose was the cross.

Paul's message to the Corinthians is not a wholesale deprecation of human reason. It is but a stern reminder of its limits when it comes to understanding God. Because of our immense pride and arrogance, it

was necessary for God to knock our human wisdom down to size, so that we could understand the great difference between human wisdom and divine wisdom. God did this by hiding divine wisdom in something that appears as sheer foolishness to human wisdom. True wisdom and understanding does not come from our own efforts, it comes from being able to see God at work in the ultimate symbol of foolishness—the cross. Drastic measures were needed to teach us that God’s ways are not our ways. The cross is God’s symbol of choice.

We spend a lot of time in church repeating the same things over and over. This story about Jesus we rehearse and rehash Sunday after Sunday. I suppose this is one of the “reasons” that so many people in our day and age have given up on church. To a world addicted to novelty and newness, our worship practices seem foolish indeed. But to us, this foolishness is holy. It is the power of God. For only in openly proclaiming the foolishness of the cross will we be reminded of the drastic measures that God had to take to save us.

Let us pray: Open our eyes, O Lord, to the good news that is displayed in the cross. Direct us to Christ first, and only then to our own wisdom and reason. Amen.