

The Foolishness of the Cross

Sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt

Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA

March 15, 2009

John 2:13-25, I Corinthians 1:18-25

Today I continue our Lenten sermon series on the cross of Jesus by examining how and why it is perceived by some to be foolish or nonsensical, and how that very foolishness points to the wisdom of God. Our first passage, from the gospel of John, depicts Jesus in the Jerusalem temple overturning the tables of the moneychangers, because the racket they are running is interfering with people being able to sense God's presence. In the other three canonical gospels, this episode happens during the last week of Jesus' life. John places it right at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Regardless of at what point in his life this event happened, it is clear that for Jesus to do something like this would be sure to provoke the wrath of the religious authorities. Ponder **that** as you hear this passage, and listen, near the end of the passage, as Jesus points to it as a sign of his crucifixion and resurrection. *Read John here.*

Our second passage comes from the first chapter of Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth. He is writing to people in a church he helped to found, people who had begun to let their egos interfere with how they related to one another. There was a type of spiritual one-upsmanship going on in the Corinthian church and Paul addresses it by pointing them to the message of Jesus cross. God's love is revealed through a suffering Messiah, not one who stands above the fray, but one who cares enough to become vulnerable to the worst humanity can dish out and still not let that dissuade him from loving even those who would hurt him. That kind of grace, that kind of vulnerability, that kind of love, is at the heart of the message of the cross. Listen for what Paul says about this in his letter. *Read I Corinthians here.*

March Madness is about to begin. Tonight the brackets will be announced for the NCAA basketball tournament. Over the course of these next weeks, sixty-four teams will vie for the prize of becoming the National Champion, the ultimate winner. Some underdogs will pull off stunning upsets. That, in addition to the large field and incredible hype, is why they call it March Madness. But before all is said and done, the championship trophy will almost certainly be hoisted by players from some basketball powerhouse, not a Cinderella private school or an upstart mid-major. Sure there will be kudos offered for how people played the game, but in the end, the biggest praise will be heaped on the winners. Good for them. It feels good to win.

In my previous congregation, we had a church league basketball team which, thanks to a couple of ringers, usually held its own fairly well. But there was one year when we were just terrible (it might have been the year before we started adding ringers). The morning after our tenth loss in a row, I stopped at a convenience store and bought myself some Ocean Spray cranberry juice. At that time, Ocean Spray was doing one of those bottle cap promotions. Look under the lid, you might win a free bottle of juice, you might win five dollars, that sort of thing. I should have known better. When I screwed off the top to my juice, you'll never guess what I found underneath. There, written on the bottom of the lid, were the words, "Sorry, you are not a winner." Talk about adding insult to injury. Not exactly the message I wanted to hear. It is one thing to lose, but when your breakfast drink tells you you're a loser, well, that's going a bit too far.

"Sorry, you are not a winner." Some years ago, Ted Turner, then owner of the Atlanta Braves, got into hot water for making the statement that Christianity was a religion for losers. Granted, his words

were not very politically astute. The criticism Turner received for making such a negative statement about a faith so many hold dear was abundant and to some extent well deserved.

As I look at the Apostle Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, I can spot where Turner came up with the idea. Because to people with a certain mindset, Christianity probably does look like a religion for losers. After all, its primary symbol is a cross. A cross where a man, hailed as a savior, died a horribly agonizing and shameful death, executed as a common criminal. A cross where one who was viewed by some as the son of God gave up his life rather than calling down an army of angels to deliver him from anguish. That cross had the inscription, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews nailed to it. But it could just as well have had the words, "Sorry, you are not a winner" nailed there instead.

Some people reject the cross as a symbol because they don't buy into substitutionary atonement; they can't see God as some sort of wrathful judge who has to make somebody pay a price in order to make humanity right with God. It doesn't make sense to them. It doesn't make sense to me either. I think there are better ways to view the meaning of the cross.

But I don't think that's the real scandal of the cross. The real scandal of the cross is that Divine Love incarnate in human flesh would be willing to become a loser, to take on the worst violence that humanity could dish out without hiding, without responding to it in kind, and while dying with words of forgiveness on his lips. If everyone the world over, particularly the ones with the most earthly power, could embrace a love like that, a love that gives without counting the cost, a love that sets aside resentment and desire for revenge, families could reconcile, wars would cease, people would have enough, and the reign of God would be a reality.

As Paul wrote, "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." Eugene Peterson in his rendering of the New Testament called *The Message* puts the first two verses this way:

"The message that points to Christ on the Cross seems like sheer silliness to those hellbent on destruction, but for those on the way to salvation it makes perfect sense. This is the way God works, and most powerfully as it turns out. It is written: 'I'll turn conventional wisdom on its head. I'll expose so called experts as crackpots.'"

The message that points to Christ on the Cross goes against conventional wisdom - and that's why Paul says later that both the Jews and the Greeks of his day had such a hard time with it.

The Jews of that day were looking for a Messiah who would come into Jerusalem on a stallion, kick behinds and take names, and establish an earthly kingdom right then and there. The Greeks were expecting a God who would be *apatheia* – apathetic - unfeeling towards human beings and above the fray of human life - a God who stayed in the realm of intellectual ideas.

They were both looking for signs that backed up their view of what it is to be powerful - and instead they got a Savior who seemed weak and submissive, a Christ who suffered and died on a cross, a God who felt, a God who feels. Like Peter in last week's Gospel lesson, the suffering and dying bothered them so much that they couldn't get beyond it to the resurrection. The notion that dying was tied up with resurrection, that dying to self and settledness was inextricably linked to new life, just didn't fit their worldview. It didn't make sense to them, interested as they were in clinging to power and control.

The cross just doesn't make sense in light of what the apostle Paul calls "the wisdom of the world." Ask the good people at the huge Willow Creek Community Church outside of Chicago. Several

years ago, I heard someone interviewed who had attended what people there call a “seeker service.” He looked around the worship space and found no crosses. Not one. There was no mention of the cross at all in the service or in the printed material. Not one. Later the man asked Bill Hybels, the founder of Willow Creek church, about the conspicuous lack of crosses. Hybels said something like this, “The people we’re trying to reach wouldn’t understand the cross. For them it’s an ugly symbol. We’re trying to meet them where they are.”

Presumably, there is a time when the seekers at Willow Creek get introduced to the cross. I hope so. It is hard to imagine deep Christian faith without it. But the leadership of that church is right in recognizing that the message of the cross runs contrary to the messages we often receive from the society in which we live.

You see, so often the message we get is, “Don’t be foolish. Protect yourself at all costs. Get all you can. It doesn’t matter who you step on to get to the top. Never let them see you sweat. Don’t ever show weakness. Get them before they get you. Be a winner and surround yourselves with winners. Losing is unacceptable.”

The cross points to Jesus and his teachings and says: “Here is a different way to live. Allow yourself to be vulnerable. Give sacrificially. Care for those who step on you. In your weakness, God’s strength can be shown. Align yourself with those who lose, with those who stand in great need. Be willing to lose all for God’s sake. For it is in losing, it is in voluntarily giving, that you gain.”

The cross stands there week after week challenging us to consider which message, which set of wisdom principles, we are called to embrace. What drives us? The cold, calculating, safe wisdom of the world? Or God’s wisdom, the seemingly foolish message of the cross? You might think about it this way. Are you worldly wise, or cross wise?

They called Jesus crazy, or foolish, long before he ever went to the cross. There is a wonderful scene in the third chapter of Mark’s gospel where members of Jesus’ family come to seize him amidst the crowds, because people were saying, “He is beside himself.” That’s just another way of saying, “He’s out of his mind.” Jesus was so passionate about his mission of strengthening the weak, healing the sick, and confronting the evil that bound people, that bystanders just knew he was crazy. Have you ever been so passionate about doing something for God or for others, that you set aside your own needs and got outside yourself for a time? Then you’ve been **cross wise**.

Take a look at today’s text from John’s gospel, where Jesus enters the temple and chases out the moneychangers. See him there overturning the tables, pouring out the coins, driving out the animals. Confronting power like that was not a very safe thing to do. You might call it foolish. His disciples saw it and remembered where it said, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” If Jesus was interested in saving his own hide, and avoiding the cross, he never would have angered the moneychangers. Have you ever challenged an oppressive system, stood up for someone at some threat to your own safety or reputation? Then you’ve **been cross wise**.

There’s no doubt many people called Paul foolish. In Philippians 3 he says of himself that he had all the privileges that he could enjoy as a good Jew. If anyone could boast about his status with God it was Paul. If anybody was a winner, it was Paul. Circumcised on the eighth day, a Hebrew born of Hebrews, from the favored tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee, a zealous persecutor of the church, blameless as far as keeping the law. He had everything going for him, in the Jewish world’s eyes. But he counted it all as loss for the sake of knowing Jesus as Lord - and understanding himself as connected to people who were very different than him. That’s looking at life **cross-wise**.

When Paul wrote to the fledgling church at Corinth, his biggest concern was that its members had stopped looking at life cross-wise. They had become so interested in looking wise, powerful, and special that they had forgotten the foolishness of the cross. When you look at life **cross-wise**, people might just call you foolish, and they didn't want that.

Has anybody every called you crazy, or foolish, because of what you believe or how you've acted in God's name?

In his book *Love in the Mortar Joints*, Millard Fuller talks about how Habitat for Humanity got started. As the book unfolds, Fuller addresses how he felt led to leave behind a multi-million dollar business, divest himself of all his money and possessions, and move with his wife and family to Koinonia Farms in Georgia.

At one point in the book Fuller tells of a conversation he had with the foreman of a local power company, when the man heard that the folks of Koinonia Farms were building houses for poor people. A long way into their conversation, the foreman asked, "But why are you building the houses if no one is making any money out of it?"

"I was becoming exasperated," says Fuller. "I've already told you," I said, "We are building them to help our neighbors who desperately need a decent house; we are doing this project because we are Christians and we believe Christians ought to help their neighbors when they are in need."

"The foreman shook his head in disbelief. "That's the craziest thing I've ever heard of!"

Fuller continues, "Now it was my turn to ask a question. "Sir," I said, "you've been grilling me about this project. Now I'd like to ask you a question. Are you by any chance a Christian?"

"Yes sir," the foreman said, "I'm a deacon in my church!"

"You're a deacon, and helping somebody is the craziest thing you've ever heard of?"

"Yes," the foreman replied. "I've never heard of anything like this!" And he walked away shaking his head.ⁱⁱ

When you think cross-wise, even other people who claim to follow Jesus might call you crazy.

Now building houses isn't the only crazy, cross-wise thing we can do to respond to God's love for us in Jesus Christ. You don't need to build houses to be cross-wise. Volunteer at Chesterbrook or with LRSS, spend time with a Dreamer, make sandwiches for Bologna Bunch or brownies for Children of Mine, do something to make a difference internationally. Take the crazy, dangerous step of inviting a friend to church next Sunday. Forgive someone who has hurt you. Let go of your desire to see them get theirs, to hurt them back, to make them pay. It is a whole lot harder to do than it is to say, but you'll find you are happier in the end.

There are all sorts of ways to think and act **cross-wise**.

- Teachers do it in the classroom when they refuse to give up on difficult kids that everybody else has written off.
- Students do it when they go out of their way to show kindness to a classmate everyone shuns.

- Employees do it when they say “no” to doing something unethical.
- Employers do it when they treat their employees fairly, even in cases when they aren’t legally obligated to do so.
- And people in all sort of circumstances do it by not letting fear and anxiety get the best of them when it seems like their world is falling apart around them.

This crazy world we live in will tell us that we need to get all the power we can, and never show any vulnerability. It will feed our fears. But embracing the message that points to Christ on the cross will feed our souls and bring us true and lasting joy. It’s up to us to decide. Which message is crazier?

At our Ash Wednesday service a few weeks ago, people came forward and had their foreheads or hands marked with the sign of the cross in ash. It was, in a strange way, a reminder of our baptisms. In baptism, we are marked with the sign of the cross as well, and called to live in Christ’s way in this crazy world.

Somehow I thought of baptism when I read this story from Elie Wiesel.

One day the king summoned his counselor and told him of his anguish: “I have read in the stars that all those who will eat of the next harvest will be struck with madness. What shall we do, my friend?”

“Nothing could be more simple, Sire,” replied the counselor, “We won’t touch it. Last year’s harvest hasn’t run out yet. All you have to do is requisition it; it will be enough for you. And me.”

“And the others?” scolded the king. “All the subjects of my kingdom. The faithful servants of the crown? The men, the women, the madmen and the beggars, are you forgetting them? Are you forgetting the children, the children too?”

“I am forgetting nobody, Sire. But as your adviser, I must be realistic and take all the possibilities into account. We don’t have enough reserves, not enough to protect and satisfy everyone. There will be just enough for you. And me.”

Then the king’s brow darkened, and he said, “Your solution does not please me. Is there no other? Never mind. But I refuse to separate myself from my people, and I don’t care to remain lucid in the midst of a people gone mad. Therefore we shall all enter madness together. You and I like the others, with the others. When the world is gripped by delirium, it is senseless to watch from the outside: the mad will think that we are mad, too. And yet, I should like to safeguard some reflection of our present glory and of our anguish, too. I should like to keep alive the memory of this determination, this decision. I should like that, when the time comes, you and I shall remain aware of our predicament.”

“Whatever for, Sire?” the adviser responded.

“It will help us, you’ll see. And thus we shall be able to help our friends. Who knows, perhaps thanks to us, people will find the strength to resist later, even if it is too late.”

And putting his arm around his friend's shoulder, the king went on: "You and I shall therefore mark each other's foreheads with the seal of madness. And every time we look at one another, we shall know, you and I, that we are mad." ⁱⁱⁱ

Baptism is just such a seal. It is our reminder in a world gone mad of what is really crazy and what isn't. We can't avoid the madness. But we can remember the message that points to Christ on the Cross - a foolishness that is wiser than the world's wisdom.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

ⁱ Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs, NavPress, 2003).

ⁱⁱ Millard Fuller and Diane Scott, *Love In the Mortar Joints: The Story of Habitat for Humanity* (Piscataway, NJ: New Century Publishers, 1980), pp. 70-71.

ⁱⁱⁱ Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972). pp. 169-170.