

“Paradox Three: The Wisdom of God’s Foolishness”

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Feb. 3, 2019

Based upon Matt. 7:24-29; 1 Cor. 1:18-31

“One of the dangers of being in church as often as I am,” Methodist Bishop Will Willimon once wrote, “is that it all starts to make sense. I speak of the Christian faith so casually and effortlessly that I begin to think, ‘Fine thing, this Christianity. Makes good sense.’ And then I find myself believing all sorts of things in church that I wouldn’t let anyone put over on me in the *real* world.”¹ That’s a pretty surprising statement for a preacher to make, to suggest that the Gospel does not make sense in the real world. But when you think about the paradoxes that are a part of our faith, as we have been doing these last couple weeks, Willimon starts to have a point. It’s the same point Paul made in today’s lesson from *First Corinthians*, citing yet another paradox. “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,” Paul wrote, “but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... 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 Cor. 1:18, 21). His rhetoric is just circular enough to make the mind reel for a minute. Yet one word clearly leaps out of all of Paul’s word play: “foolishness.” The message of the cross is foolishness to some, Paul notes, using a word in Greek, *moria*, the root of which also inspired the contemporary insults “moron” and “moronic.” That the message of the cross could be seen as moronic to anyone can be an unsettling idea to Christians like us who, like Willimon, call the Church home. In the Church, for us, the cross is about as far from moronic as you can get. It is a sacred symbol of God’s saving love and grace in Jesus Christ, a symbol of an astonishing, undeserved divine gift, and the beginning of a new creation. So, we decorate our sanctuaries and bodies with crosses, sing about surveying the cross, and call the day that Jesus was hung upon one “good.”

But to people in Paul’s day, as well as some people in our own, the idea of God saving the world by dying on a cross is not intuitively obvious; it’s foolishness. So if we want to celebrate the wisdom of God in it, and live in the real world at the same time, we need to understand why they see the cross that way, and why we don’t. In Paul’s day, crosses proclaimed a lot of things, none of them good. They said, “Rome is in charge, and has no qualms killing you if you get out of line,” and declared those who hung on them to be “criminals, low-lives, losers,” and worse. Crosses screamed social, political, and spiritual “failure” not “triumphant success,” and in Jesus’ day, they screamed often. First introduced as a form of capital punishment by the Persians in the 6th Century B.C.E., crucifixion only grew in popularity among oppressors over time. During the Hasmonean era about a hundred years before Christ, Alexander Janneus crucified 800 Pharisees simultaneously, magnifying their suffering and the evil of the act by killing their wives and children in front of them. But when Rome came to power in 63 B.C.E., that’s when the Empire really perfected the practice because crucifixion was the Empire’s preferred form of torture and execution. The Roman authorities crucified those who were part of military revolts by the thousands. They crucified criminals, robbers, and assassins, slaves and servants. They crucified so many people during the siege on Jerusalem in 70 C.E. that they ran

¹ Willimon, William H, “*Looking Like Fools*,” in THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY, March 10, 1982, 261.

out of room and wood for crosses. But only non-Roman citizens were killed. So, the cross became the ultimate grisly deterrent used to ensure that the non-Roman rabble would not be tempted to disobedience, rebellion, or treason. No one talked about crucifixion in polite company, any more than people today chat about who is on death row. Crosses were obscene and offensive and scary on multiple levels; no one wanted to think about them, let alone celebrate them.²

For Jews living in and around Jesus' day, it was inconceivable that anyone, even a fellow Jew who was killed on a cross, could be good let alone God, not just because Rome said the person wasn't, but also because the Law did. According to *Deuteronomy* 21:22, those who died "on a tree" were cursed by God. For Gentiles living at the same time, it was inconceivable that anyone who was crucified could possibly be a god because the gods they worshiped were immortal beings of immense power. They would not have taken on human flesh, and they could not possibly be killed by human hands. So when Christians like Paul first started talking about a crucified criminal named Jesus actually being God incarnate, the Gentiles thought they were mad. There is even graffiti from this time scratched into the stone in a guardroom in Rome which depicts a figure of a man with the head of a donkey hanging on a cross. Just below it is a man raising his hands in a gesture of adoration, and the caption, "Alexamenos worships his god."³ Crucifixion and salvation, crucifixion and God's blessing, these ideas simply did not go together.

Given the perceived foolishness of the message of the cross, it seems like even greater foolishness on Paul's part that he made Jesus' death on a cross the center of his Gospel proclamation. I mean, it is sort of Advertising or Advocacy 101, that if you want to persuade people to adopt your position you either need to meet them where they are, or to persuade them that you have something they want, or both. Paul could have done that with the Gospel. He said that the Greeks desired wisdom and the Jews demanded signs. Jesus provided both. Think about all the parables, the sermons, the wise insights into human nature and the Law. Remember just a few weeks ago all the Pharisees in the Temple were impressed by Jesus' wisdom when he was only twelve years old. It wouldn't have been difficult to get the Gentiles to pay attention to Jesus as a wise sage, but Paul didn't present him that way.

Likewise, if the Jews wanted signs that Jesus was the Messiah, signs that he had the power of God, Paul could have given those to them too. Jesus fed thousands with practically nothing, walking on water, healed the blind and lame. The gospels are filled with stories of Jesus' miracles. John even calls them "signs," because he knew what people needed to hear about in order to believe. But for Paul, the only miracle which really mattered was the Resurrection. He didn't write about Jesus' life and teachings. Instead he talked about his death and Resurrection and what they meant for the world.

Why did he do this? Well the short answer is that because of his encounter with the resurrected Christ, he knew that the Gospel was true whether people thought it made sense of not. He knew that Christ was God, not a criminal, and that he had given his life to set people free.

² See Green, Donald E., "The Folly of the Cross," THE MASTER'S SEMINARY JOURNAL, 15/1 (Spring, 2004), 59-69.

³ *Ibid* at 64.

But I also believe that Paul chose to emphasize the cross because he himself was wise enough to know from his own experience that framing the good news in a way that made sense to the people would invite more problems than it would solve.

Think about what Christ had called Paul to do. Jesus had called him to create a community of faith where people of all kinds, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, men and women, rich and poor could come together. Corinth was a perfect place for him to do this; it was a dynamic port city and therefore a very diverse place. But no sooner did Paul gather the Corinthians together than they started trying to rank and reject each other. The Gentiles, who valued knowledge above all, felt that those who could convey philosophical wisdom with perfect and compelling rhetoric should be esteemed above all. The Jews who valued the Law felt that they should be esteemed above all. The rich and successful looked down on the poor and struggling, the indulgent Epicureans looked down on the abstaining ascetics, and so on and so on. Almost from the very beginning the congregation was threatened by divisions because everyone assumed that their values were God's values, their rules for ranking were God's rules. They were sure that they knew the way to salvation. They were sure that they knew what a saved person looked like and sounded like. They thought they were so wise, but they really were a mess.

So instead of playing into their hands by talking about wisdom or signs, and therefore given them more ammunition to throw at each other, Paul emphasized the one thing that didn't fit into any of their parameters. God, in Christ, saved the world through a means no one would choose or could do, so that humanity would know that salvation comes from God, not from what we do. God was wise enough to know that if God tried to save the world by some means within our control, we would try to control that means. This is what the Israelites did at the time of the Isaiah prophecy Paul quotes, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." (Isaiah 29:14). At the time Isaiah spoke those words, the king of Judah was trying to save itself from being conquered by making political alliances with Egypt (with Pharaoh!!), rather than listening to Isaiah's instructions. The king tried to go it alone, insisting that he knew better, and the nation was conquered.

Human beings have always thought we know better than God. We don't agree on what better is, but we all share an instinct toward pridefulness and a yearning to be in control. "Look, God knows humanity," Paul conveyed implicitly by citing Isaiah. "God knows how highly you esteem your knowledge and your power. God knows your competitiveness, your stubbornness, and your arrogance. So in God's wisdom, God decided not to use either human standards or predictable means to save the world. God chose 'what was foolish in the world to shame the wise, and what was weak to shame the strong,' and what was low and despised to shame the rich and powerful, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. God saved us God's way so that we would see the foolishness of our own ways. God embraced the folly of the cross so that we would embrace the new life and new wisdom that come from following God's way instead of our own."

Maybe it was Paul's conversion experience which enabled him appreciate the wisdom of God, for through that experience he was confronted by just how prideful and self-righteousness he had been. But you don't need a Damascus Road experience to recognize that human beings

tend to be prideful, judgmental, and controlling. All you need to do is look around. As Abraham Heschel once wisely observed: “Dazzled by the brilliant achievements of the intellect in science and technique, we have been deluded into believing that we are the masters of the universe and our will the ultimate judge of right and wrong. However... man is neither the lord of the universe nor even the master of our destiny.”⁴ We live in a Corinthian world, one in which we chop ourselves to pieces and build oppressive hierarchies according to all kinds of criteria. Even in the Church universal, we still argue about who understands the wisdom of God better and who deserves to be saved. Our “real world” human foolishness has led us into the partisan nightmare that currently tortures our country. It has led us to unspeakably awful wars, and created more pain and damage than even we can fully appreciate. It would have been a disaster if only educated people, or perfectly legally compliant people, or rich people or powerful people could be saved. It would have been a disaster if God preferred rhetoric to substance or righteousness to soul. When it comes to ranking, competing, and judging, human beings have a real problem. God knows this, which is why God wisely took the salvation business out of our hands.

Moreover, when we think about God using the cross specifically to do this, we discover that the cross speaks far more to our foolishness than God’s. The cross shows the obscene foolishness of human violence. It shows how unjust human “justice” systems can be when we allow fear and prejudice and power-plays to corrupt them. The cross reveals the moronic and evil nature of public shaming, and the dangers of crowd mentality. The cross is an obscenity, but it is ours. By accepting death on a cross, Jesus held up a mirror to humanity, and the image wasn’t pretty.

In addition to revealing human foolishness, moreover, God also revealed pastoral wisdom in choosing the cross to save us. To a people who could not believe in divine forgiveness unless a sacrifice was made, God gave a sacrifice, and to a people who wondered whether God cared because their suffering was so great, God showed God’s solidarity in suffering by taking on the physical pain of the cross, the spiritual pain of a man feeling abandoned by God, and the pain of a parent losing a child. Only God could convey a message of compassion, notwithstanding the hideous cruelty of the cross, and message of hope, through a weapon associated with failure. This is the power of God, to take what we think we know, and turn it upside down and inside out, until we can see ourselves and the world as they really are, and as they really can be through God’s grace.

There will always be people who see the cross as foolishness because they are so convinced of their own wisdom, and who build their houses on sinking sand. But we choose to build our lives on the rock which causes others to stumble, the cross, not because we are wise, but because we have seen in Christ that God is. God is the source of our lives in Christ Jesus, he is our source of wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption. Thanks be to God! Amen.

⁴ As quoted in The Living Pulpit, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Wisdom Issue), July-Sept. 2000, 14 (citing Heschel’s book Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity.)