

This passage from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth is one of my favorites. I love it because it best illustrates Paul's gift of radical grace. But not all Presbyterians are fans of Paul, because he is often cited only as a moralist. Passages from his letters are used to say that people should do *this* but should not do *that*—take preaching for example. There are some passages in scripture that suggest that you should not have hired me, a woman, to be your pastor. But Paul addresses many of his letters to women, who were leading the churches in their community. Perhaps we can have a Paul Sunday School class next year to solve these discrepancies. But until then, please trust me when I say that mainline Protestants need to re-claim Paul and his writings.

He was a good Jew, well versed in the traditions of his people. He was not someone who followed Jesus. He was someone who persecuted the followers of Jesus. And then God broke into his life through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

And once he encountered the risen Jesus, he completely changed his life. Dropping all of the privilege and power that came with being a Jewish leader, he became an itinerant preacher, roaming around Asia Minor, delivering the Good News of Jesus Christ.

And once he met or started a community in a town or city, he kept in touch with them through letters. Some of these letters, written to address specific situations in specific congregations, were copied and passed around to other churches and became a part of our New Testament. But Paul's writings were never meant, by him at least, to be scripture. And remember—when we open our bibles, we see the Gospels in the New Testament before we encounter Paul's letters, but Paul's letters predate the writing and circulating of the gospels. Paul would have been a contemporary of Jesus, yet they did not know each other. His missionary journeys begin less than 10 years after Jesus' death and resurrection and he is suspected to have died around the year 60. The earliest possible dating of a gospel account is in the mid 60's, after Paul's death. So, while accounts of Jesus' life and ministry were no doubt circulating in oral form in the years after his death and resurrection, Paul's letters are the first material we have from the early church.

One of the reasons, I suspect, that Paul's letters were circulated so widely in the early church is because of how unique his message and his experience of Christ was.

Even though his message grows out of Old Testament understandings and beliefs, his experience with the risen Christ leads Paul to turn those understandings upside down. For example, there is a theme in the Old Testament of God siding with the underdog. Israel is the prime example of a people who had no army, no power, no resources, no land, and no future. And yet, God chooses them to be God's people. But Israel continued to believe that their selection by God had removed their underdog status. Now that they were God's people, they kept expecting success. Their plan, now that God was on their side, was to defeat and destroy their enemies and to become the 'top dog', as it were.

But Paul, reading the Old Testament through his experience of the risen Christ, preaches a new message. Paul says that the wisdom of the world is foolishness. That the plan to become the top dog will not work. That self preservation and self promotion will get you nowhere. Paul argues that being the underdog is what God is calling us to be.

Echoing the passage we heard last week from Mark—if you lose your life for my sake, you'll find it.

This passage from Paul's letter to the believers in Corinth was written with a very specific context. He had spent some time with them. But then his journeys took him elsewhere. And when he left, some other teachers showed up. Some other teachers who were better spoken,

and better looking. They were charismatic and quickly drew a following, but they were not preaching the same message that Paul did—of radical abandonment of the status quo. Instead, they were preaching a prosperity gospel, of sorts. They were continuing on with the understanding that having God on your side means success and prosperity.

And so Paul writes the Corinthians a letter, praying for unity. Praying that they might not be divided. Praying that he'll remember the gospel they heard proclaimed by him.

Right before our passage today, Paul sets up his argument—“now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.”

And if you want to know what that same purpose is, he says, listen to Paul, *not* to some smooth talking guy.

Because Paul was apparently not a good speaker. Preaching was not his gift. And he wasn't so nice to look at either, by his own admission. But Paul is a brilliant rhetorical thinker, who was well versed in the crafting of an argument. In verse 17, after talking about the factions and who-baptized-who, he says, “for Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel—and *not* with eloquent wisdom, so the cross of Christ might not be emptied.”

In other words—*eloquent wisdom empties the cross of its power*.

And then Paul, the person who puts no stock in human wisdom, uses a lot of it to build his argument.

God tried the wisdom of the world, he says. God sent prophets. God gave the people signs. God raised up kings, leaders, and judges. And you know what? The world still didn't know God. So God threw human wisdom in the recycling bin and did something crazy. Foolish, even. God became human.

And God did not become human the way Hollywood would script it. He was born in poverty, in a no account town, to an unwed teenage mother. And the clearest expression of God's human divinity was through humiliation on a cross, at the hands of an occupying power.

Think about how *odd* that looks to the world. The central Christian symbol that decorates our sanctuary—the cross— is the ancient equivalent of the electric chair.

And Paul argues that this is GOOD NEWS because it DEFINITELY kicks us out of the cycle of trying to solve our problems through human wisdom. We will never be clever enough or eloquent enough to rely on our own abilities or expertise for salvation or to know God. Paul reminds us that the foolishness of God is better than the best human wisdom. So why would we want to rely on ourselves?

This message from Paul also has implications for us at Southminster as a community of faith, as part of the body of Christ. Because it is to Christ we look for our model. But the church is as seduced by the wisdom of this world as was the church in Corinth. Christians seek power in strength, not in weakness. We seek to be popular and successful, not maligned and oppressed. I, as your preacher, seek to be eloquent and use the wisdom I possess; yet it is through the “foolishness of our proclamation”, as Paul puts it, that God saves people.

This is one of those sermons where my answers only get me in more trouble. We are left to struggle with this text if we want to be faithful to the gospel and not be distracted by human wisdom.

A famous preacher¹ provides a helpful term as we consider the paradox of modeling church on the weakness and foolishness of the gospel. He calls the church a “being saved community”, which comes from the beginning of this passage—“for 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”. Each day, every day, we are in the process of being **saved from** “cramped little lives of selfishness and **saved for** the broad, roomy, loving discipleship of the cross”². Perhaps if we see ourselves as a “being saved community”, it will help us live in humility. Rather than just becoming a Christian and then considering the matter solved, this might help us live **each day** as people in need of God’s grace. Perhaps if we see ourselves as a “being saved community”, we’ll feel less need to rely on human wisdom, and can instead trust in Christ, the “power of God and the wisdom of God”. If we see ourselves as a “being saved community”, hopefully there will be room for others to join us in the journey. Hopefully we’ll be able to trust in God’s foolishness and see the paradox of our faith as Good News. And, hopefully, the sign of the one cross will call us, again and again, to unity. It is around this cross, this sign of the world’s wisdom being revealed as foolishness, that we all gather. Young and old. Rich and poor. Liberal and conservative. All of those labels belong to the wisdom of the world. Trusting in the foolishness of God to bring us all together under the cross, under the label of “those who are being saved.” Amen

¹ David Buttrick Homiletic: Moves and Structures (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) p 459

² Jeff Paschal, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2 p. 89.