

1 Corinthians 1: 18-25

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

²⁰ 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? ²¹ 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. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³ but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

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“The Paradox of a Faithful Fool”

Imagine St. Paul sitting in on a preaching class. The professor tosses out the question, “As a preacher, what is your central message?” After all, it is said that preachers have one or two main themes in their sermons they keep mentioning over and over again. One student in the class raises her hand: “My main message is to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.” “Good!” says the teacher. Another student raises her hand, “Mine is about loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and loving our neighbors as ourselves.” “Excellent!” says the teacher. Then a small framed bald-headed Middle Eastern man with a beard (whose name is Paul) raises his hand and says, “The cross.” If I were the professor I would flunk him on the spot. It’s not very creative. It won’t attract members. It’s not in the least inspiring, but it is what he says in our bibles. The central message we are to proclaim as people of faith is the foolishness of Christ crucified.

Well, it doesn’t make much sense. Of all the things we could say about God, the cross is probably not at the top of the list. Instead, how about we talk about the God of creation? God as the orchestrator of the ecosystem. The arranger of the spheres and the sea shells. The Divine Lover who created us out of ancient stardust and brings us to life with a holy kiss. It’s uplifting. Or maybe we can preach about the God that our Jewish sisters and brothers want to hear about. The story of an Almighty YHWH who show us signs of power as YHWH delivers us from the Pharaohs of our time. Now that’s a message that will inspire us to do something! Or perhaps we would like to pontificate about God’s wisdom like the Greeks preferred to do. God offering us these empowering nuggets of insight to chew on to help us get through the week. Look, there are plenty of other things we could say about God. For the Greek, the Jew, or the Presbyterian. But the cross? The cross is probably not at the top of our list.

Yet, somehow St. Paul insists that the gaudy Jew who hangs on Rome's instrument of death is central to understanding who God is. That it is on the cross where we find God being God the most. Notice: not in the empty tomb. Not even in the beginning of the Spirit-filled church, but in the gruesome tragedy of the cross. If you've ever read Elie Wiesel's trilogy on his time while living in a concentration camp, you might recall a scene when the Gestapo began tying knots for nooses to hang three prisoners who were charged with the crime of sabotage. Among them was a young boy who didn't weigh enough to die mercifully. So the entire camp stood assembled, forced by Hitler's regime to watch as the young child jerked back and forth for minutes until it was finally over. It's the most horrible image. Someone in the crowd lamented, "Where is God now?" To which Elie Wiesel heard a voice rise within him saying, "There God is, hanging from the gallows."¹ It's awful. It's horrifying. But it is where St. Paul claims that God is being God the most. Not where two or more are gathered. Not in the power of healing miracles, but in the child swinging from a rope; or an unarmed black man shot dead on the street; or in a poor, homeless Jewish carpenter who hangs broken on a cross.

So if it's true—that God is most revealed in the moment of agony—what do we learn about who God is? If the cross is God's definitive moment, what does it say about God? There are a few main theories floating around. Perhaps we say it means God is with us in our suffering. Like the picture in our newspapers of a woman with the Ash Wednesday cross on her forehead embracing another mother in the Parkland, Florida school shooting. We could say God is like a mother who embraces us in ours by getting a firsthand experience of what our suffering is like—God is *with us*. Or we could claim that the cross means nothing and that God simply suffered *because of us*. Because of our rebellion and rejection. After all, Jesus does not die at the hands of villains in black hats and twisty mustaches, but at the hands of decent people like us: clergy, patriots, God-fearing folk who were threatened because Jesus was not who they wanted him to be. So some say Jesus willingly suffered to be with us, others say it was because of us, but a third possibility is that Jesus dies *for us*. You see, whether we like it or not there is this "sin thing" that keeps getting in our way—this fear thing, this greed thing, this me-me-me thing. Somehow, Jesus frees us from ourselves and when he says, "It is finished" he means it. None of us can explain it, but does it do us any good to deny it? Like Barbara Brown Taylor once said, "[To deny it] would be like pounding more nails. Into him. [And] into us."² Perhaps we need to weave all three options together like a braid because one definitive answer isn't sufficient to tow the mystery by itself. But if St. Paul is right, then what do we learn about God? God suffers *with us, because of us and for us*.

But here comes the real question: *how does the message of God's foolishness impact our lives?* Do we think about it while we are at the job or in a bed at the hospital? Does it shape our faith when we are overwhelmed at home or impact the way we do church? You see, our conventional wisdom tells us that life is about the pursuit of happiness—nothing wrong with being happy—but the message of the cross says that our lives are more about the pursuit of faithfulness. Why? Because we belong to God, and when you belong to God anything can happen. Our conventional wisdom teaches us how to make it in this world—nothing wrong

¹ This is from Elie Wiesel's book entitled, *Night*.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering*.

with making it—but the message of the cross says it isn't about making it at all. Instead, in a world that values strength, success and security, God is calling on people like us who are willing to love so radically that it seems foolish even to our human impulses and especially to the worldly value systems we rely on. There's a two-thousand-year-old picture, dates back to 200 A.D. from Rome. It is etched into the side of a plaster wall, like graffiti you'd find inside a bathroom stall. It is of a young boy worshipping before a forlorn figure with a donkey's head hanging on a cross. Surrounding the boy are a bunch of other children, pointing fingers and laughing at him in mockery. Underneath the picture the caption reads: "[The boy] worships his God." But scan the picture a little more and see written into the corner in small print it says, "[The boy] is faithful."³

God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. God's weakness is stronger than human strength. It's the paradox of the cross. Could there be a message more foolish? Could there be a message more faithful?

³ This story is found in *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as Rhetoric of Folly*, by Charles L. Campbell and Johan H. Cilliers pp. 2-6. The story is about a boy named Alexamenos. The artifact is now in a museum in Rome.