

## "Wise Foolishness and Strong Weakness"

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

January 29, 2017

4th Sunday After The Epiphany

Next Sunday is Super Bowl Sunday -- the Atlanta Falcons playing the New England Patriots for the championship of the National Football League. Formerly, this was merely a football game. Now, it has become a spectacle. You'll see many things next week if you tune in your television sets: bands playing, fireworks, fly overs, some star singing the National Anthem and an extravagant show at half time. But there is one thing that you will not see. You will not see a 129 lb tackle line up for either team. It would be ludicrous. In the same way, if you watch an NBA game, you're not going to see a 5' 2" power forward playing. It would be foolish. If any Super Bowl team had a 129 lb offensive tackle or any NBA team had a 5' 2" power forward, they wouldn't be taken seriously at all. They would be laughed off the court or playing field. The NFL is for the strong. The NBA is for the tall. Successful teams are composed of the strongest, biggest, and tallest players.

This is how we tend to view things in all aspects of life. The most successful people and organizations are those who have the most - most strength, most power, most money, most skill and so on. We choose the institutions that we deal with based on those criteria, figuring they must be better because they have more. We choose Walmart over the local department store, a major grocery chain over the local market, a large auto dealership over a small repair shop.

We may even look at church in the same way. We might think that "bigger and stronger is better". The more God-pleasing church is the one that has the dynamic and inspiring preacher, the choir that sings like angels, the worship services that grab us and hold us with superb audio/video technology and all sorts of influential and successful members who serve as great role models and examples of the victorious Christian life. If these things are not present, then something must be wrong.

Then we look at our church. Where are all the influential and important people? Let's face it: as far as people go, we are nothing but a bunch of ordinary and insignificant people, many of whom are older and retired, tucked away in a state - Montana - which a lot of people across the country can't even find on the map. We are certainly nothing worthy of notice. As far as churches go, we may seem to be very weak, having a small membership, low attendance, and not enough money. We may not be considered very important. The church may be well down the list of priorities for many people. To many, there's nothing "cool" about church or its members.

What's wrong with a plain, ordinary, average church like this? Not a thing, according to St. Paul. In our text, he is writing to the church located in one of the most sophisticated and cosmopolitan cities of the Greek world - Corinth - the New York City of its day. And what kind of people comprised *that* church? The rich and affluent people? The high society crowd? Statesmen, entertainers, and lawyers? Not at all. Paul reminds them, "For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth." They were ordinary people, probably even a lower class than you and me. The church at Corinth was composed of slaves and freed slaves. Not all were from these groups, but not many came from the nobility, the movers and shakers, or the intellectual class.

Why is this? Is the church only for "losers" as Karl Marx, the founder of Communism once implied when he defined religion as "the opiate of the masses"? Is God unable to attract the important people of the world so He is forced to settle for the likes of us? Not at all. Paul makes the astounding assertion that the slaves, the freed slaves, and the other riff raft of Corinth, as well as the unimportant common people stuck way up on Montana which the world, the nation, and probably even our own relatives who live back east would consider to be politically and socially insignificant, are all part of the church of God by His divine choice, rather than by accident. Paul writes, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are."

God completely turns the tables on the world and its values. Instead of basing membership in His family, the Church, on the criteria that every other group, organization, or institution in this world uses to determine its membership - merit, beauty, strength, social standing, skill, financial status or intelligence, God purposely chooses the foolish, the weak, the lowly, the non-important, and the non-entities of this world to put to shame the world and its standards of what is important and really matters.

He brings the foolish, weak, lowly, and non-important into His church through a way that is equally foolish, weak, lowly, and non-important. His plan was so foolish that the world cannot comprehend it, accept it, or practice it. Instead of seeking revenge upon humanity for our stubborn rebellion and callous disobedience to our Creator's commands, He decided to forgive us. How stupid is that?

He accomplished that forgiveness, not through glory and might, but through unimportance and weakness. He would put aside the use of His divine power to become a human being. The Son of God would become not just any human being. He wouldn't become one of the wealthy, one of the mighty, one of the nobility, but He would take on the form of the lowliest and least important servants.

He would not ignore sin or conquer it with His might. Instead, He would take upon Himself the burden of your guilt and your sin so that you would be relieved of these burdens. He would sacrifice His life through one of the most despised methods ever invented – crucifixion - in order to spare your life. He would go to hell and be despised by His Heavenly Father so that you could be accepted by Him and go to heaven.

How foolish was this plan! How weak and lowly was the Son of God to take on a human nature! How insignificant, according to the way the world measures significance, was the death of Jesus of Nazareth on a cross nearly 2,000 years ago! Yet God raised Him from the dead to show that it was indeed the right plan and the acceptable plan to bring you back into a relationship with God.

You are here today, not because you are good enough, smart enough, skilled enough, pretty enough, strong enough, rich enough, or important enough. Nor are you here simply because God chooses the foolish, weak, lowly, and despised things of this world and you happen to fall into one or more of those categories. Some have claimed that God loves the poor because they are poor, the foolish because they are foolish, or the weak and lowly because they are weak and lowly. But some of you are quite intelligent, are financially well off, and are well regarded in our community. You are here today, not because of who you are or who you aren't. You are here simply, purely, and totally because of God's gracious and undeserved love.

"And because of him you are in Christ Jesus", Paul writes. He joined you to Christ Jesus in your baptism. You didn't choose it, earn it, or deserve it. Yet because He joined you to Christ, you have what you could not choose, earn, or deserve. You have what Christ gained at the cross and empty tomb, namely, as Paul writes, "our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption."

You have a righteousness, that is, a "right standing" before God which is not merited by you. You were like a criminal, standing guilty before the sternest judge. You deserved to have the book thrown at you. Yet this judge, God Himself, declares you, not to be innocent or undeserving of the penalty, but "not guilty". You are acquitted of any and all charges against the Law of God because His Son paid the penalty and took the punishment.

You have a sanctification, that is, a life of good works, which are not of your own doing. Try as we might, we simply cannot live lives of obedience to God on our own. Yet Christ dwells in you by faith. He comes to you this day in His body and blood at Holy Communion. He promises to live in you and let His holiness shine through you every day of your life. Because of Christ's presence in your life, your thoughts, words, and deeds will reflect that presence of Christ in you.

You have a redemption, that is, a final hope, which you cannot accomplish. People in our world today try, through diet, exercise, vitamins, medicines, and medical procedures, to have a long and healthy life. Yet it is ultimately a futile effort because all will eventually die. However, Christ has redeemed you, that is, paid the price through His blood shed on the cross, so that death cannot have you. What all the diets, pills, and medical procedures cannot accomplish, Christ has accomplished through His resurrection from the dead. You have life that never ends in a place which Christ Himself is, at this very moment, preparing for you.

You have all these things - a right standing before God, a life lived pleasing to Him, and an eternity of joy in His presence - without regard to who you are, what you look like, what you have, or what you can do, but solely because of His grace. What a relief it is in our competitive, merit-based society, that, despite how low the world may view us and the Church, God regards us highly for Christ's sake!

It is also a warning. We dare not become proud of our high standing before God, either. God chose us out of grace so, as Paul writes, "no human being might boast in the presence of God." All of us are the same - whether rich or poor, strong or weak, intelligent or foolish, theologically astute or babes in the faith, lifelong church members or new converts. We have gotten here only because of God's love and His action based on that love. We have no reason to boast of any accomplishments of our own.

If you want to boast, Paul says, boast in the Lord. Instead of taking pride in the fact that you are a lifelong Lutheran, a faithful member who never misses church, someone who gives generous offerings to the church or serves faithfully as a Sunday School teacher, volunteer, or on the Board of Directors, and expecting to be noticed and praised for these things in our community or in our congregation, give credit to God for choosing you to be His own, for giving you all the material blessings and skills that you have, and for enabling you to use them to His glory and for the good of His people. Praise Him for all that He has done for you, in you, and through you.

An oxymoron is a phrase that has words that seem to be contradictory such as "jumbo shrimp" or "military intelligence". God works in such oxymorons as "strong weakness" and "wise foolishness." He gained a powerful victory over evil, death, over hell itself by becoming weak, taking on the form of a lowly servant, and carrying out the most foolish game plan the world has ever seen. He has chosen to share the victory with those who are weak, foolish, lowly, and unimportant. Through His weakness, you, who were weak, become strong. Through His poverty, you who were poor, have become rich in spirit. Through His lowliness, you, whom the world considers to be unimportant and unnoticed, have been elevated to the position of sons and daughters of God. You may still be seen as weak, poor, lowly, and unimportant by those around you, but, in the eyes of God, you are among those whom Jesus calls "blessed" in the Gospel reading today. And, when all is said and done, that's all that matters, isn't it?  
Amen