

"A Foolish Message"

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

January 30, 2011

The 4th Sunday After the Epiphany

When you read the newspaper, watch TV, or go into stores, you always see advertisements for products being sold. I enjoy noticing how companies try to sell things. One ploy will use ads that say something like, "New and improved" or "extra strength." That always made me wonder what was wrong with the previous editions of those products. Nevertheless, these ads attract people because people, even if they are content with the present product, are always looking for new, improved, and stronger products.

People do the same in their spiritual lives. Many people today are looking for spiritual help and strength but they are bored with the traditional church. Why? People want "extra strength" religion. People want to see spiritual power and proof that God is truly here. People want to see miracles. Many people enjoy buying books about miraculous events and people who have had near death experiences because they want just such an experience for themselves.

People are also looking "new and improved" teachings and beliefs. They feel that old teachings and old beliefs are boring and offer little help for this present age. These people are looking for ideas that are "deeper" and "more spiritual". People are turning to belief systems that are "spiritual" but not religious. Some are excited about a movement called "the emerging (emergent) church" which disdains doctrinal answers to spiritual problems, but simply encourages continuing the conversation without arriving at any hard and fast conclusions. Many people, hungry for new, deep, spiritual thinking, are following those teachings and religions.

This desire for "extra strength" religions with "new and improved teachings" is not a new phenomenon. Our text for today talks about people who lived long ago and desired the same thing. It speaks about the Jews who were not interested in speculating about God. They wanted to see

God's power and miracles. They had seen God's power and miracles during Old Testament times. Now, they were waiting for God to send the Messiah. They expected to see the Messiah come and perform miracles, show God's power, become a mighty king, and reign here on earth.

Then, there were also the Greek people who were very proud of their intelligence and their philosophy. They were always searching for new ideas and new teachings. But they expected intelligent ideas, full of wisdom. Many of the Greek people were not sure if God was real, but if there was truly a God, then they expected God to reveal Himself in a logical way with wise teaching and deep thoughts.

When the followers of a 33 year old rabbi from the tiny country of Israel proclaimed to the world that they had the answer to the question of life itself - it's meaning now as well as hope for the future, people were interested. But, when they spoke a message about the Son of the one, eternal, almighty God becoming a human being and dying on a cross to rescue people from death and hell and give them eternal life, many who heard that message were disappointed and couldn't believe it.

The Jews were very disappointed. They could not accept a crucified Messiah dying on a cross. They expected power and strength; miracles and great displays of God's glory. Jesus seemed weak and humble. A cross was reserved for the worst criminals. The Jews felt that if Jesus died on the cross, it meant that He had failed. This message of a crucified man actually helping them was unacceptable to them. It bothered them and humiliated them too much. Therefore many of the Jews rejected the message of the cross.

Greek people were likewise disappointed in this message. They couldn't believe that God would become a man. To many of the great Greek philosophers, only the spiritual was good; matter was evil. There was no logical reason for God to taint Himself by associating Himself with the material world. And how would dying on a cross help people? That only made it worse. Greek people thought that a foolish and stupid message. They wanted a more wise and intelligent message that made sense. Therefore, many of the Greek people rejected the message of the cross.

The message of the cross still bothers people today. It doesn't make sense to many people and it certainly lacks the "pizzazz" that other religions and philosophies offer. One of Satan's biggest temptations is for you to ignore the message about the cross and look for something "new and improved" with "extra strength." For fourteen years I served in full time deaf ministry and was the regional adviser for a group of deaf churches in the midwest. One time, a pastor in one of the deaf churches told me that a member had come up to him and complained, "You always preach about Jesus and the cross. We want something new and different." We may chuckle at such a comment, but do you ever feel the temptation to complain in the same way?

Maybe you think the message about the cross is also boring and meaningless. It seems to be the same old thing every week. And maybe the preacher isn't even all that dynamic in delivering the message. You may see all these TV programs, books, and magazines about new and deep teachings and you are curious. You may hear motivational speakers on TV and in person preaching the power of positive thinking and promising "your best life now". You feel that you really need something new and deep.

In addition, you don't see any power and proof that God really loves you. The miraculous cure that you prayed for doesn't materialize. You don't see what some people refer to as "Spirit-filled" worship happening. The "signs and wonders" of God's presence that you hear other people talking about aren't there. Many people are leaving churches because what is happening there just isn't exciting and powerful enough.

It's natural to feel that way, but those are Satan's temptations. The cross seems weak and foolish. And it is, but that's by God's design. Since this world's might and wisdom only made people arrogant disbelievers in God, God decided to show them by using something weak and foolish to rescue all people from their own folly. This message of the cross, as powerless, impotent, illogical and nonsensical as it may appear to be is actually the power of God.

What is that message? That the holy and righteous God decided to take all of our sins against Him - our evil deeds, as well as our failures to do good and give them to His Son, Jesus Christ. Then, God decided to nail His Son to a cross and kill Him so that He could kill and destroy our sins. Literally, Jesus became sin so that we could become holy before God. As the Scripture says, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus was punished so that we could escape punishment. Jesus died so that we can live.

And one very important thing about the message of the cross: it is an empty cross. Jesus did not stay on the cross. Jesus did not stay dead, but He rose to live again. This is God's guarantee that we, too, will rise to live in the glory and joy of heaven forever.

Now, none of this was particularly powerful when it happened. When Jesus died, most people in the world knew nothing of it and even those who lived nearby probably didn't even notice it. It didn't attract anyone's attention by its miraculous nature. Even those who saw it happen did not realize its significance. None of it made sense -- one Man dying in place of all people. It wasn't logically, philosophically, or intellectually sound. Yet, as our text says, Christ is God's power and wisdom. This message is not good advice about how to improve your life. This message is not about God's power. The Bible says that the message of the cross is actually God's power to save people. His cross has the strength to conquer sin, Satan, and hell.

How do people receive the benefit from this message? Simply believing it -- that's all. It does not require understanding, intelligence, or deep thinking to acquire it. As St. John so simply, yet so profoundly put it, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

And how do people come to believe this wonderful news? God did not send angels to proclaim it or speak it Himself from heaven. Many people think that would be a smart way to do it. But God doesn't use those "smart ways". God uses what may seem as foolishness to the world. God uses us. God uses my foolish preaching and your awkward sharing of the message of the cross

with other people. When people hear that message, though it seems weak and unsophisticated, God works in them to believe the message and be saved, too.

You don't have to be strong and mighty to become right with God. You don't have to be smart and super-intelligent to know the way to heaven. God chose a weak way - the cross - so that weak people like you and me could be saved. God chose a way that seems foolish - His Son's death - so that people who are not what the world might consider sophisticated like you and me could live forever.

There is just one thing that you need to remember. If you put your faith in this weak and foolish thing - Jesus' death on a cross, then other people in the world will consider you to be weak and foolish, too. People may mock you for having a simple faith in "just Jesus". People in the world may look at your Christian faith as not being as powerful compared with the "powers" of this world - wealth, military might, and the like or not as sophisticated as some of the philosophies and world views that are floating around. Even fellow Christians may look at your confidence in Christ crucified as being inadequate - not as flashy as some churches which emphasize "signs and wonders" and manifestation of the Holy Spirit and not as sophisticated as Christians who attempt to merge Biblical teachings with other so-called great spiritual teachings that the world offers.

However, Jesus suffered by going to the cross. You will suffer for putting your faith in the message of the cross. You will experience mockery and rejection from people inside and outside the Christian church. You may want to give up and go looking for something more powerful and exciting. You may want to go looking for a deeper, wiser message. Don't give in to Satan's temptation. Remember the words of our text for today: "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." Regardless of what the world may think, the power of God will endure and triumph. People with all their wisdom and all their might cannot defeat God's power. The message of the cross - the holy Son of God, Jesus Christ, suffering and dying on your behalf to forgive your sins and make you holy in the sight of God - is that power. It

and it alone will save you. May that foolishness give you wisdom and may that weakness give you strength now and forever. Amen.