

“Wise Foolishness”
I Corinthians 1:18-25//Mark 8:27-9:1
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I. Text

Schisms, factions, divisions, and petty rivalries are tearing the church in Corinth apart. It is not God’s hope for the church. It’s not God’s hope for any church. In our text this morning Paul “puts his finger on the problem.”

Read I Corinthians 1:18-25.

II. Brief Exegesis

A. Introduction

China and crystal once stood on display. My mom looked, saved and shopped for years. Finally she found the pattern she liked. The china came in a setting for 12. A china cabinet also came to our house to display it.

The crystal came a different way; one piece at a time. For years I remember asking my mother what she wanted for Christmas, or her birthday, or Mother’s Day....and the answer was always the same; a piece of the crystal, please. And so for years we got her a water glass, or a wine goblet, or a sherbet dish. A setting of each for 12 took my Junior High and High School years to acquire.

The china and crystal stood in the china cabinet on display. It was thing of beauty in my mother’s eyes. To me it looked like commitment and patience over years.

The china and crystal came out of the cabinet once a year; for Christmas Day dinner. The dining room table would be set in formal elegance. We took special care. And when the dishes were washed we all held our breath. The dishwasher couldn’t be trusted, so it was all hand washing. The plates were never stacked. The crystal went through the wash and rinse one at a time. There was no rattling together in the bottom of the sink. Once carefully dried, the china and crystal were placed on the dining room table for my mom to carefully put back in the china cabinet herself.

And there they would be on display for another year. I saw it as my mother’s claim and territory in our family. With a husband and three boys, who had cars, motorcycles, sports, mountains of dirty clothes, and big appetites, the china and crystal were my mom’s statement and place in the “sea of maleness” that was our family. There was a type of wisdom in taking special care with it.

But that all changed about 20 years ago. In her early 50’s my mom had a heart attack. It turned her life upside down and inside out. It changed her views and changed her life. One of the changes was with the china and crystal. Since she enjoyed it she thought “why not use it more?” And so she did. The china and crystal came out of the cabinet much more frequently.....sometimes even for just a dinner for two. A dramatic

event had changed things. The joy was worth the risk of using the china and crystal more. What once seemed wise, now seemed foolish. And what once seemed foolish, now seemed wise.

B. Brief Exegesis

As Paul writes to his friends in Corinth he wants them to understand that the cross is the dramatic event in world history. It's not a curiosity, or an unfortunate sidetrack for Jesus, or one of many endnotes in the story of the world. The cross is the dramatic event of God's grace and power bringing the end time reign of God into the world. It is the beginning of the end.....and the beginning of the new beginning. It is the salvation of God. And this dramatic event turns things upside down. What once seemed wise is now foolish. And what once seemed foolish, is now wise.

That's what Mark is telling us in our gospel text this morning, isn't it? Confessions of Jesus as the Christ, the Savior of God, bring visions of triumphalism, ego, power and conquest. That's the wisdom of the world. It's believing and expecting God to operate in the world just like any other power in the world. But Jesus speaks a different wisdom. "This is the wisdom of God," he says. "The Savior will suffer, be rejected, be killed....and in three days rise." It is the wisdom of the cross. It is not the wisdom of the world. There's a silence.....the disciples are stunned. It seems foolish. Finally Peter speaks a little wisdom of the world to Jesus; "No Jesus, that's not how the Savior of God thing works." Jesus rebuke of Peter is quick and stern. The wisdom of God is not the wisdom of the world. The wisdom of God.....is the cross. And then Jesus presses the point for any who might want to follow him: "If any want to be my followers....let each of them deny themselves, take up their **cross**, and follow me." The wisdom of God for Jesus is the wisdom of God for followers. The cross is the dramatic event that turns things upside down....a wise foolishness. And like those who first heard Jesus.....we squirm a little.

Paul's point in his letter to his friends in Corinth is the same. They love knowledge, and rhetoric, and language, and degrees, and popularity, and who's published what. They reflect the wisdom of their culture....only now with religious sounding words. They like religious talk, but stumble over religious acts. The wisdom of the cross seems foolish. They're like church leaders at a conference talking together about church size, budget size, who went to what school, who has what degree, who's at what church, who's had what published, and who's spoke at what conference.....there's a buzz in the room. And then someone comes into the conference and over a 'mic' asks, "Who wants to go work in a soup kitchen.....or give sandwiches to people on the street....or mentor kids who can't read....or preach at a homeless shelter....or do a little painting at a housing rehab....or visit a little, old man in

a nursing home....or shovel snow off the sidewalks of the neighbors across the street? Who will go?" There's stunned silence at the conference.....and a little squirming. It's the clash between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of the cross. It's the problem in Corinth.....and in lots of 'Corinths'...where ego, pride, status and desire for popularity distort the life of the church.

The cross is the wisdom of God. There's a lot of confusion about the cross. On the one hand the cross is understood as foolish, and so it is absent from where we might expect it; "too religious," "too old school," "too negative." And on the other hand I see crosses as earrings, crosses as tattoos, crosses stuck in lawns in long rows, and crosses as bumper stickers and hanging from mirrors. I'm not always sure what I'm suppose to understand. But I do believe the cross is the wisdom of God that turns life upside down; foolishness becomes wisdom, and wisdom becomes foolishness.

The cross is the statement that Christianity is about the story Jesus. It's about his life, teachings, miracles, way of life, death and resurrection. It's about knowing the story of Jesus, reading about the story of Jesus, thinking about the story of Jesus, and sometimes wrestling with the story of Jesus. The cross is the dramatic, life changing event that declares that Christianity is not about me, my prosperity, my entertainment, and making my life comfortable. It's not my story. The wisdom of the cross is the story of Jesus.

The cross is also the statement that God acts to save us. It's about God acting to save us all, and each of us growing into the fullness of salvation. It's about the power of God that overcomes sin and death for us, the power of God that pays the penalty of sin and restores relationship, and the power of God that moves us to love like God. The cross is the end of the old, and the beginning of the new.....that only God can do. Therefore Christianity is not about me saving myself. That's foolish ego. The wisdom of the cross is the salvation of God.

Finally, the cross is the statement about God's way of life. It's about a new way in a new creation that is breaking into the old. It's about forgiving 70 times 7, not holding grudges. It's about greater life being found in sharing, not getting and grasping. It's about something as crazy as spending as much time reading scripture, praying, and thinking and talking about Christian faith as we do watching television. (Imagine that?) And nowadays it's discovering there's a fullness to life with less. Such things can look foolish in the wisdom of the world.....but it is the wisdom of the cross....God's way of life.

III. Brief Reflections

I heard an interesting story this week. It is a true story. In the late 19th C the Netherlands Reformed Church had deep conflicts between liberals and conservatives. The church had drifted far from its core confessional heritage of Christian faith. “Ego-fueled” schisms arose, not so different than Corinth. One group was determined to restore the church to its historic beliefs by church politics and church courts. And if that didn’t work, they’d leave. It seemed to make since to some.....the wisdom of the world. In a few years they left, and formed the Reformed Church in the Netherlands.

But another group had a different idea.....a different wisdom. They decided that they would stay in the church, and they believed they could heal the church by focusing on Jesus and the Gospel. And so they did. One, two, three generations go by, and the church that had forgotten Jesus was reintroduced to Jesus. The story of Jesus, the salvation of Jesus, and the way of Jesus was preached, taught, studied, discussed, wrestled with, and lived. And over time a change happened. Church renewal and growth broke out in the 1930’s and 1940’s, even in a non-religious place like Amsterdam. The church was still diverse. But there was even a greater unity in faith about Jesus Christ that held them together. Though it took three generations, the healing in the church happened. It is a real parable to ponder. It was the wisdom of the cross in this new day. (Story from lecture of Dr. Edwin van Driel, 1/10/12)

And today my mom’s china and crystal are not in her china cabinet. A few years ago my mom and dad drove up from Arizona, and brought the carefully packed china and crystal with them. It was a gift to my daughter Katanya. My mom wanted to know the joy of giving what she enjoyed for so many years to a granddaughter she loved. To my mom that was the greatest wisdom of all. It is the wise foolishness of the cross.