

Sermon Text: I Corinthians 1:18-25

None of us likes to look foolish, but I confess that I continue to find ingenious ways to do that, usually by insisting that I am right about something, and it turns out that I am dead wrong.

We are all that way because we want to impress other people, we want to look good. Nobody ever got ahead in this world by looking foolish.

That's why our New Testament lesson for this morning comes as sort of a problem to us, I Corinthians, the first chapter, where Paul says, "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those being saved it is the power of God."

What happened at Corinth was that people joined the Church because they wanted to be successful. They had heard there was a new religion in town that promised them wonderful things. First of all, it promised that you would have a new life. If your life is a mess, it gives you grace to patch it up again. It was releasing power in people that they didn't even know they had. It was transforming their lives. What did Jesus say? "I have come that you might have life, and have it in abundance." That's what they came for. That got their attention. Besides, they heard that when they died, they would be raised from the dead because of Christ' resurrection. All they had to do was believe. It was wonderful. They were promised new life, now and immortality later.

So they joined the Church looking for the secret power that gives new life. That power would enable them, they figured, to have an edge on the competition, that they would get ahead, have special gifts not given to others. They would be wiser and stronger than anybody else.

Paul said the Church is here to create a new way of living in this world, not to help you get along in the old world. The Church is here to transform the world, to change it, not to bless the way it is. The world divides to define who we are. Who is in, who is out. Who is sophisticated, who is foolish. Who is right who is wrong. Who is a sinner, who is righteous. That's the way the world organizes itself, by division, by setting up boundaries and saying, you belong over here, you belong over there.

But according to Paul, in the Church, we are all one in Christ Jesus. Christ has knocked down all walls of separation, everything that has divided us. In fact, in his life, he transcended every one of them. He ate with sinners. He embraced the outcasts, people that nobody else would touch in this world. He forgave the condemned. The last thing he did on the cross was forgive a criminal. He visited foreigners. Jews would have nothing to do with foreigners. He went across borders to visit them. He crossed borders throughout all of his life.

And then – Paul says this is central. You can't be a Christian unless you hold on to this – he was crucified on a cross. “On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame.”

It was that shame that got to them. The cross had only one meaning in those days. It was a symbol of shame. No messiah, no son of God would ever be crucified on a cross. Some of the first graffiti ridiculing Christians showed a man on a cross with the head of an ass.

So the Corinthians said to Paul, thank you for pointing out this business about the cross. We already knew it. We just choose to ignore it, and we would appreciate it if you don't bring it up again. They said what happened to Jesus was unfortunate. In fact, they admitted, it was unjust. It shouldn't have happened, but it happened. But it's past, irrelevant, because we now have Christ's

Spirit with us. Christ is here. Christ lives with us. Christ's Spirit now empowers us. We are spiritual Christians. That's how we would like to be known, Paul. We are empowered by the Spirit to do wonderful things. I can do all things through the Spirit that empowers me now. We are winners, not losers. We are strong, not weak. We are wise, not foolish.

That's what Paul had to face at Corinth, a church that wanted to get rid of the cross, because it was a sign of suffering and of shame. You preach that business about the cross here in Corinth, Paul, I'll tell you, people will think there is something wrong with us. They will stay away from us. You will never be successful in the world talking about a cross.

That's when Paul wrote to them: "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. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

That's what I want us to look at this morning, that text. The temptation is to explain it in such a way that it fits into the way the world does business, to take the scandal out of it. Paul says, don't take the scandal out of the cross. Let it stay there. Because if the Son of God ended up on a cross, it doesn't say so much about the Son of God, as it does about what kind of a world this is. There is something terribly, terribly wrong with this world if the Son of God ends up on a cross. So keep the scandal in the cross.

Also, the way of the cross is the way this world is going to get fixed. The way of the cross is the way of love. Paul describes what is happening in Corinth, people separating themselves from others on the basis of the gifts that separated them, made them better than other people. Paul says if you believe that, you are acting as if Christ has never died. Paul says, "I'll show you a more excellent way. "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy

gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”

What Paul is saying is that the wisdom and the power of the cross is love. Love is what we saw on the cross. It was because of love that Jesus got on that cross for us. A love that is given to us freely, so that we would take that love into our own lives, and then love one another.

That’s what he means by the power and wisdom of God. He’s talking about when Christ emptied himself, humbled himself, for us. Christ humbled himself to exalt us.

Recently the movie of Mr. Rogers Neighbored was released. Mr. Rogers was very conscious of the power of television to shape children’s lives. So he tried to present attitudes of respect and kindness toward other people. Someone asked him what his rationale was for his programming on television. Is there a theology? He said I Corinthians 1:25 summed it up.

That’s our text for this morning. “For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdoms, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Rogers told of an incident that helped him to see what this meant. He and his wife were vacationing with friends. They went to church one Sunday morning. Rogers said the sermon was terrible. As the minister was preaching, Rogers was listing all of the things the preacher was doing wrong. When the sermon was over, he turned to his friend to tell her what he thought of the sermon. He saw tears running down her face. She whispered to Rogers, “He said exactly what I needed to hear.”

That’s when Rogers learned what Paul was trying to tell the Corinthians. Love is not arrogant. Love is not rude. Love does not pretend to know all things. Love never puts anybody down.

Love finds some way to lift everybody up. That's the world that Mr. Rogers Neighborhood tried to create on television.

Here's another image of the cross, the way it works in the world. John Plummer was a Methodist minister in Virginia. He flew helicopters in the Vietnam War. In 1972, he set up a strike against a Vietnamese village, after he was assured that the village had been evacuated.

A few days after the strike, he saw that Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of a nine year old girl running naked and burned from napalm. It listed the village in which she lived, and it was the village that he had bombed. He said, "That image burned in my heart and haunted me for many, many years."

In time Plummer convinced himself that he had done everything humanly possible to make sure that the attack was not made until after the village had been evacuated. But every time he saw that picture, his guilt would return. He started drinking heavily. He was discharged from the service in 1982. His marriage fell apart. His wife and his children, he had 4 children, left him.

Then he met his second wife. She led him back to faith. He went to seminary, Wesley Seminary, the Methodist Seminary in Washington, D.C. He was ordained, and sent to a church in rural Virginia.

That nine year old girl in the photograph is named Kim Phuc. She collapsed right after that picture was taken. The photographer who took the picture picked her up, took her to a nearby hospital. She survived the burns. Years later she began the long process of plastic surgeries. Her chin was attached to her chest with scar tissue. What was left of her left arm was attached to her rib cage. The plastic surgeons removed all that scar tissue.

Several years later the newspaper ran a story that revealed that she was alive and well, living in Toronto. Plummer saw that article in a newspaper and said that he wanted to see her and ask for forgiveness. At a helicopter pilots' reunion, he met a Vietnamese poet who knew Kim Phuc, and said that he would arrange a meeting. The poet met Kim Phuc in San Francisco the next week. She said she would meet Plummer in Washington, D.C., when she would speak at the Veterans Day observance in that city.

Plummer asked his helicopter pilots if they would accompany him to Washington. Fifteen, along with the families, went with him to Washington. Kim Phuc got up on the platform to speak and revealed what had happened that day. Instead of leaving the village, her family had hidden in a pagoda. When the bombs started to fall, they ran. That's when it happened. She told about what happened to the other people in that photograph.

Plummer began to sob. His body began to shake. His friends gathered around him, put their arms around him. She concluded by saying that if the pilot were there, she would like to meet him, and forgive him. She said, "We cannot change the past, but we can make sure together that we have a better future."

The word passed up through the crowd to her that Plummer was there. He was escorted to meet her. She saw him coming. She held out her arms to him, embraced him, he held on to her. He said, "I'm sorry," over and over again. She said, "It's all right. I forgive you." Plummer said, "I was floating. I was free. I finally was at peace."

She invited him to come see her at her hotel. He did. He learned that she had been converted to Christianity in 1982. They talked for two hours. At the end, they had prayer together. Now she calls Plummer her "brother." They are friends and continued to stay connected.

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved [who know what God did for us on the cross] it is the power of God.”