

“Embracing God’s Foolishness”  
John 2:13-22

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*"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."*

Author and Presbyterian minister, Frederick Buechner, offers his unique perspective on this passage, from his book Secrets in the Dark:

*The message that a convicted felon was the bearer of God's forgiving and transforming love was hard enough for anybody to swallow and for some especially so. For Hellenized sophisticates—the Greeks, as Paul puts it—it could only seem absurd. What uglier, more supremely inappropriate symbol of, say, Plato's Beautiful and Good could there be than a crucified Jew? And for the devout Jew, what more scandalous image of the Davidic king—messiah, before whose majesty all the nations were at last to come to heel?*

*Paul understood both reactions well. "The folly of what we preach," he called it (1:21), and he knew it was folly not just to the intellectually and religiously inclined but to the garden variety Corinthians who had no particular pretensions in either direction but simply wanted some reasonably plausible god who would stand by them when the going got rough.*

*Paul's God didn't look much like what they were after, and Paul was the first to admit it. Who stood by Jesus when the going got rough, after all? He even goes so far as to speak of "the foolishness of God" (1:25). What other way could you describe a deity who chose as his followers not the movers and shakers who could build him a temple to make Aphrodite's look like two cents but the weak, the despised, the ones who were foolish, even as their God was foolish, and poor as church mice?*

The Apostle Paul's skill as a church conflict resolution specialist might be suspect if we consider the way in which he deals with the fledgling church in Corinth. He is angry at their behavior to one another, and frustrated over their misunderstanding of the lessons he tried to teach them during their formation. In this letter he is speaking to a Corinthian church that is struggling because of divisions within itself, moral behaviors inappropriate for followers of Jesus Christ, arrogance about possession and use of spiritual gifts, and even conflict over leadership within the congregation.

So, here at the beginning of his letter does Paul address the issues? NO! In the center of this destructive conflict, what does Paul talk about? The cross.

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Why the cross? What could this possibly have to do with resolving conflict within a church congregation? On the other hand, why not the cross? Maybe Paul has his priorities straight, and is going to take the Corinthian church down a different road of understanding about what

it means to be the church of Jesus Christ.

Listen to what Christian author Max Lucado has to say about the nature of the cross—as it appears in history, and as it appears to those of us who call ourselves followers of Christ:

*"[The Cross] rests on the time-line of history like a compelling diamond. Its tragedy summons all sufferers. Its absurdity attracts all cynics. Its hope lures all searchers. History has idolized and despised it, gold-plated and burned it, worn and trashed it. History has done everything but ignore it. How could you ignore such a piece of lumber? Suspended on its beams is the greatest claim in history. A crucified carpenter claiming to be God on earth. Divine. Eternal. The death-slayer. Never has timber been regarded so sacred. No wonder the apostle Paul called the cross event the core of the gospel. It's bottom line sobering: if the account is true, it is history's hinge. Period. If not, the cross is history's [greatest] hoax. Which is the cross for you, hinge or hoax?"*

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There are many Christians who find this verse challenging. We accept the sovereignty of God; we accept God's distinctive act of salvation through Jesus Christ. However, in a world with almost 7.6 billion people, only about 2.2 billion profess to be Christian. That leaves about 5.4 billion of the world's population in, what Paul would call, the perishing category. In this multi-cultural, multi-faith, and in some cases, no-faith, world, what does it mean for Christians to hold up the cross as the banner for eternal salvation? We all know how we feel about those Christians who say to other Christians, "If you don't believe what I believe, you are going to hell." How do those of us who profess to be more open-minded and progressive share that message with non-Christians? How do we talk to others about *"those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved ..."*?

Even though John Calvin is credited with teaching the doctrine of predestination, he also taught that we do not know the final destination of others. God judges; it is not our job. God alone knows "those who are perishing." It is not for us to speculate. As Christians, we preach the ways of Christ; we teach the ways of Christ; and we attempt to live the ways of Christ. We work for justice and offer compassion—but we always remember our own sinfulness, and that our salvation cannot be earned, but is only by the grace of God. That is why we leave judgment in the hands of God, who is fully just and wholly merciful.

And, then there is that phrase "being saved." Different Christians interpret what "being saved" means in different ways. For some of us, the phrase "are you saved?" implies everything from an attitude of divine superiority all the way up to an accusation of damnation—"get saved or burn in hell forever." I think most Christians accept that "being saved" or being "born again" means surrendering our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ, but it also offers us the freedom of living into our potential as children of God. Each day, we are given the opportunity to be saved from lives of selfishness and bitterness – and saved for the loving and compassionate discipleship of the cross.

And here we are again – right back at the cross. The greatest stumbling block of this passage—and for most Christians—is the cross itself. Preachers often avoid saying very much about the cross. We dance around it, but we are reluctant to divulge the costliness of the cross to our Lord, and for those who are brave enough to take up their own crosses to follow Christ.

But, Paul does not avoid getting right to the heart of the matter. Instead, he focuses on the cross.

A man visited a church on a Sunday morning. He parked his car and started toward the front entrance. Another car pulled up nearby, and the irritated driver said to him, "I always park there. You took my place!" The visitor went inside and found that Sunday School was about to begin. He found an adult class, went inside, and sat down. A class member approached him and said, "That's my seat! You took my place!" The visitor was somewhat distressed by this rude welcome, but said nothing. After Sunday School, the visitor went into the sanctuary and sat down in an empty pew. Within moments another member walked up to him and said, "That's where I always sit. You took my place!" The visitor was troubled, but said nothing. Later, as the congregation was praying for Christ to be present with them, the visitor stood, and his appearance began to change. Scars became visible on his hands and on his sandaled feet. Someone from the congregation noticed him and cried out, "What happened to you?" The visitor replied, "I took your place."

Some things that happen in church are silly. Some things are downright scandalous. Some things may even be sacrilegious. But the Church is still the body of Christ and it was for the Church that Christ died.

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God's foolishness in the cross also calls into question what we value. We are captivated by the beautiful, the popular, and the wealthy; but the cross is ugly, shocking, and humiliating. The cross represents the impoverishment of Christ, who emptied himself for our salvation. The cross reminds us that our ultimate allegiance is not to our country, not to our family, not to our work, not even to our church, but to Christ. For followers of Christ, the cross proclaims that we honor truth when lies seem easier, gentleness when might is attractive, justice when sustaining the status quo would be simpler, generosity when greed calls to us, forgiveness when bitterness would taste so good.

And, the cross reminds us of our unity as the Christian church. Though at times difficult to admit it, we are all bound together under the Cross of Christ—liberals, moderates, conservatives. Our community of faith is still formed around a symbol of absolute foolishness—an instrument of cruelty and pain—used for the salvation of the world. Despite our theological differences, our biblical disagreements, our ritualistic variations—we all follow Jesus the Christ – and we all affirm, with Paul, that *"God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."* AMEN