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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany  
January 29, 2023

Lectionary Year A: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

In today's installment of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, we see a comparison made between *wisdom* and *foolishness*, and, without going into painstaking detail, it's pretty clear that Paul has his sights set on the more philosophical inclinations of the ancient Greek people. When broken down into its roots, the word "philosophy" itself means *love of wisdom*, and it was the Greeks who gave us Plato and Aristotle, ethical theory, and systems of government...all things for wise people to ponder.

The love of wisdom – or *philosophy* – has shaped civilizations and taught humanity how to think. Speaking personally, I was a philosophy major in college, so I studied Plato and Aristotle along with developing skills of logic and reasoning – all of which was tremendously helpful when my seminary studies required me to interpret biblical and theological texts. So when Paul, in our Second Reading, pooh-poohs the role of philosophy in our life together, I'm quite frankly nonplussed.

The only way around that, so I've found, is to recognize the limitations of philosophy and human wisdom. And that plays very well into Paul's point. A great philosopher or a great philosophy cannot save the world.

But Jesus Christ can save the world!

Paul certainly wasn't the first to lift up the baffling, unexpected, and paradoxical way in which Christ saved the world, however. One could point out that the earthly life and death of Christ himself did that. Christ came not as a mighty king but as a humble servant. He came not as a political revolutionary but instead to revolutionize the hearts and minds of people. He did not accomplish his purpose by military might but instead through dying on a cross (which was misinterpreted as defeat). Paul points out that – to the world – much of this appears to be *foolishness*.

I referred to it as “baffling, unexpected, and paradoxical,” but Paul cuts right to the chase!

In Paul's view, the failure of people to “get” Jesus Christ was inherent to the way they were. From his world, he names Jews and Greeks, which nowadays probably wouldn't be very smart for a Jewish Christian preaching to Greeks...but it worked in his time. These were Paul's exact words: “For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:22-23). There was no burning bush to appeal to Jewish sensibilities and there was no rational philosophical treatise for the Greeks; instead, Jesus as the Christ defied any and all such expectations and offered himself for the world – not as a sign or as a philosophy, but as a Savior.

Yet, taken too far, one could misinterpret Paul as a champion of irrationality and foolishness. Paul is *not* giving us license to make outrageous claims and say ridiculous things; on the contrary, he is merely making a point that the proclamation of Christ crucified runs against the grain of the rational philosophical world he inhabits. This leads me to wonder if

some of the assumptions we make about what it means to be the church in 2023 and beyond are *reflections* or *contradictions* of the world around us. It seems that Paul – running against the grain – was deliberately and sometimes provocatively *counter-cultural*.

This raises a pertinent question, then, for us: Should we (or shouldn't we) be counter-cultural too?

Later this morning, we will begin our Annual Meeting, which, in many ways, doesn't look much different from the annual meetings of any corporation or non-profit organization – complete with next year's budget, election of officers, and recognition of those stepping off the board. Not exactly “counter-cultural.” But I would argue that some amount of “business” is necessary for our organization to stay afloat.

Yet we are *not* a business. We aren't here to turn a profit and we don't promise dividends to our shareholders. Ministry of the Gospel – the Good News of Jesus Christ – is what we do, and that can't be put in terms of profit and loss. But we can, through this ministry, see all the organizations and individuals we have helped, and we can, as we gather here for worship and fellowship, have a place of refreshment and rest for our souls.

The apostle Paul might point out that it's pure foolishness to not make money and pay dividends to our shareholders. And then there's the example of Christ, which would call us to give away our earthly treasure and receive spiritual riches instead. Now, I realize that this doesn't appeal to our more rational sensibilities, but remember Paul's words: “For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human

strength” (1 Corinthians 1:25). Indeed, God’s ways are beyond our understanding, to the point that the *best* we can proclaim is foolishness in the minds of mortals.

But this apparent foolishness can save the world...

The world often bids us to celebrate growth, prosperity, and strength, but, as we read the apostle Paul, it seems as if he’s leaning more toward contraction, poverty, and weakness...much like Christ himself. But then, as an example, Christians are not immune to worshipping numbers for the sake of numbers in their own churches. Granted, nobody wants to be a part of a dying church, but an idolatry of numbers can inadvertently give undue attention to personalities, especially those of clergy in leadership. Whether a church grows, shrinks, or remains stable, we thank God if we’re growing or stable, and we pray to God for the wisdom to respond appropriately if we’re declining. Most of all, we acknowledge that the church is *God’s* work and that we are God’s vessels in this work...not “gods” ourselves!

That said, I’m going to ask you, “What is God up to at St. Anne’s Episcopal Church in Warsaw, Indiana?” If you need some hints for your answer, you can look at your Annual Meeting booklet when you get a chance. And then, if you’ve been a member of St. Anne’s for a few years, you can ask, “What has God been up to in the past at St. Anne’s?” I think this congregation’s story over the decades contains so many examples of adapting to whatever circumstance was put before it...all the way back to the makeshift altar made out of the bar at the Hotel Hays in 1950. Such adaptability will continue to serve you well as you consider the challenges ahead of you in 2023 and beyond.

Adaptability is an indicator of humility; it says that one's perceived idea of "the best" or "how things ought to be" is no better than that which is sufficient for everyone. In fact, we most often find our calling where Christ himself went – among the lowly, the lost, and the least – which, in itself, requires humility. Paul writes: "God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are" (1 Corinthians 1:28). I believe that the "things that are" include all our vain ambitions, our idolatries, and virtually everything that draws us away from God. But in place of those "things that are" is Christ, who rescued us from those vain ambitions, idolatries, and things that draw us away from God. Thus, while money, craftiness, wisdom, and numbers may serve us well from time to time, they won't save us.

But Jesus Christ can save us!

We are called, therefore, to embrace the counter-cultural and (perhaps) counterintuitive logic that Paul puts before us, realizing that most things the world deems "important" (wisdom, wealth, power) are *nothing* next to the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Yes, we'll continue to need both monetary and human resources to be the church in 2023 and beyond...but the Good News we share and God himself are infinitely more important than anything else in the world. Let us, then, act accordingly.

Please remember, too, that our non-profit, non-dividend-paying "foolishness" is the way we are the hands and feet of Christ in the world. May Christ's saving grace be known by ordinary people like us who proclaim our Lord and Savior in word and deed.

Amen.

