

Foolish Power

Vicar Lincoln Albrecht—March 14th, 2010—4th Sunday in Lent—1 Cor. 1.18-25

Sean was here. Graffiti is one of those crimes which grabs your attention—which is why people do it. Psychologists & sociologists say these messages show an urge to leave a mark on the world before death.

Graffiti is not unique to American culture. People have been using graffiti for centuries. In an archeological dig in Rome around the imperial palace of Caligula researchers found a fascinating piece of graffiti, a picture of a crucifixion with an engraving which read “Alexamenos worship his God”! Poor grammar aside; this engraving is one of the oldest renditions of a crucifixion and has fascinated scientists and Christians alike since it was rediscovered in 1857.

The picture, not the poor Greek, is most memorable. A man is stretched out on a cross with the head of a donkey. A shocking and blasphemous picture to those of us who cling to the cross—but it offers an interesting commentary on the way early Christians were thought of. Their God had the body of a criminal and the head a beast—more absurd than divine.

But God is not concerned with looking absurd to man, and Paul explains this to the Corinthians, a group of Christians who knew Jewish and Gentile rejection first-hand. Oddly enough, Paul understands the thoughts of this ancient graffiti artist. The message of the cross is foolish power. Utter foolishness to the human sense and mind, but complete power for salvation.

To the Jews, who were looking for miraculous deeds, the message of a crucified Messiah is a stumbling block. But in the heart of each of us is the skeptical Pharisee. **Because the message of the cross is a stumbling block to our senses.**

Our eyes look around us and we don't see the powerful God of love we read about. We see hardship in the lives of everyone, unbelievers and Christians alike. And it doesn't make sense. If God is love why doesn't he demonstrate his love throughout the world? Why doesn't God feed the hungry, heal the sick, rid the world of the disease and despair that plagues us?

Then people would recognize his power, his love. We want answers, demonstrations of power—& unless we see it we are like doubt-filled Thomas

And our ears hear about God's promises and we are just as skeptical as the Pharisees. We hear the promises of his love and his forgiveness and we wonder how he can promise to do that. We haven't seen his power with our own eyes, so why should we believe what he says? Why should we believe that the waters of baptism can offer forgiveness of sins, marking the baptized as redeemed heirs? Because we see the baptized—and they don't look different. Young children are still selfish afterwards. We know that we were baptized and we don't always see the difference in our lives. We don't feel different.

The message of the cross is an imposing stumbling block to our taste buds. When we receive the Lord's Supper Jesus promises that this bread is also his body and this wine is also his blood. And he promises that through these he gives us personal assurance of forgiveness of sins. But it tastes like ordinary, dry, flat bread. It doesn't look any different. It doesn't taste any different. Same thing with the wine. It looks like wine. It tastes like wine. How can Jesus say these are his body and his blood? Our senses say it is ridiculous to think these ordinary elements are anything but ordinary.

It's hard to accept that God can and does do these things, when our senses say otherwise. Because we don't see it, we don't taste it.

And the foolishness of the cross doesn't end there. It only begins there. Our logic and our reason want to cry out to God to explain himself, explain his thoughts, his ways so they make sense. Because it just doesn't.

We expect God to look, well...divine. Powerful. Glorious. Honorable. In control of all things. And then we have Jesus who tells us he is the Son of God. And yet he doesn't even have power over the Jewish court system. We see his body and his name shamed as they heap insults upon him, striking him with blows, mocking him with a purple robe. We see in Jesus a man who is

in control of no one. Being bound and led around. Looking all-too human. How could a loving and powerful God, who could do whatever he wants, select his Son as the one who had to die for the sins of the whole world? Why would a loving God punish anyone at all, especially his one and only Son?

There are so many questions we might have for God—but the answer to them all is in our text. Paul, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is writing to tell his fellow Christians saying “I know what it looks like, what it sounds like, what it seems like...but God chose to do it this way.” Everything about the plan of salvation is counter-intuitive. **The message of the cross is foolish power. Utter foolishness to the human sense and mind, but the complete power for salvation.**

Because there are so many things about God we cannot explain, or logically sort out. It makes the attacks of unbelievers so damaging. The late-night comedian can point out the illogicalities of our beliefs. The expert on the History Channel can point out why the Bible can't be the complete, inspired, inerrant Word of God. Asking questions that we want answers to. Questions we feel that we are owed answers to. And that is frustrating. I want to know how God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit can all be God and there still not be three 'gods'. Everything I learned in mathematics tells me there has to either be 3 gods or three entities that are partially God. But Scripture doesn't explain the doctrine of the Trinity so my reason can accept it. Instead it preaches the full message of the Gospel, the work of the God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit so that my faith can receive it. But where human wisdom and logic fail, Scripture succeeds in saving us.

The message of the cross, the Son of God crucified may be foolish to our finite mind and limited senses, but it is the power of God. To the unbeliever, the one perishing, as Paul describes him, the message of the cross is absurdity, nonsense, asinine. It is not what the sinful man and his mind is looking for. The Old Adam demands miracles and impressive flexes of his right hand. He looks for a flow of logic pointing to God's existence and what he is 'all about'. God provides neither for the unbeliever, and yet both for the believer.

For the believer, God has found a way to demonstrate both his perfect avenging justice and his perfect forgiving grace, at the cross of Christ. The believer accepts this 'foolishness' as divine wisdom because a new way of thinking has been created in him by the working of the Holy Ghost, that which looked like gross nonsense now appears to be the greatest wisdom, and what appeared to be an impossible contradiction is accepted as divine truth.

Our God of love and power, wise beyond our limited understanding, has revealed his power before our very eyes. Through faith, when we see a baptism, we see the change God enacts in that person's life. No longer are they perishing, but they are being saved by the waters of baptism. It doesn't have to be logical, explainable, reasonable. It is true. This is the way that God was pleased to claim his children as his own.

And Christ has revealed his wisdom, his love, and his power to our ears. Every time we hear Gospel promises, every time we gather together and confess our sins, he responds by completely and fully forgiving us for everything we have done, we see his power. We see his wisdom. We see his love.

And this is the same power and love he extends to our sense of taste. In the Lord's Supper, we taste his perfect sacrifice for our sins. We do not taste the cup of wrath which we deserved. The Son of God finished that cup. Instead we receive the cup of forgiveness of sins. In, with, and under the bread and the wine we receive personal assurance of the forgiveness Christ won for us in his death on the cross.

To the Christian who knows the power of our loving God, there are plenty of miracles; the wisdom of God abounds. He offers a simple message of undeserved love, that even a small child can trust in fully. We see his wisdom and logic as he uses Scripture to explain itself. We see his intelligence in his design of creation. We see his thoughtfulness in the way in which he works, with simple elements—water, wine, bread—to deliver forgiveness of sins.

You see to the unbelievers this message is summed up in the Alexamenos graffiti. The figure of a man with the head of a donkey on the cross. “You worship that!” they may say, mocking us. All the experts of the world, the wise men of this age will

speaking of how foolish it is to believe such a thing. But to us who are being saved, the message of the cross is the power of God, wiser than mankind's wisdom, stronger than mankind's strength. The crucifixion is a foolish power—not meant to appeal to our mind or our senses, but meant to win our hearts that through faith it might be the power and wisdom of God for salvation. Amen.

Philippians 4:7—The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.