

**Sermon**  
**McCarter Presbyterian Church**  
**3rd Sunday after Epiphany**  
January 26, 2020

**Old Testament Lesson**

Psalm 14:1-4, 7

**NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon**

1 Corinthians 1:10–18

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.' Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name.

(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

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.

**Foolishness in the Cross**

Somewhere around 20-25 years after the founding of the **early church** by Christ, the **apostle Paul** wrote a series of letters to the church in **Corinth**. This was remarkable, because the city of Corinth in its day would compare to a combination of modern Philadelphia, Miami, and Las Vegas here in the United States. It was supported as a vital center of trade by **the Romans**. It was the main stop in a narrow strip of land that lay between the two bodies of water that surrounded Greece and Athens. In order to avoid uncertain weather and winds in the open Mediterranean Sea, merchants would land on one side of the isthmus of Corinth and transfer goods from one port to another by wagon. This made Corinth a lot of money as a center of commerce. And, it remains an important site today.

With its special function, it supported all manner of **business** and entertained merchants and seamen, making it a place with poor manners, **fast money**, and a growing population of the "newly rich," as we say today. With all of these business dealings, Corinth also attracted all sorts of people around the Mediterranean and points beyond the **Roman Empire**. These people brought their religions with them from Egypt and Persia. Corinth became a place known for its many **temples** to all of these various gods and goddesses, which were termed pagans by the Jews and Christians.

So, these are factors that affected the group of **believers in Corinth**. At first glance, we should be amazed that the church had a foothold there, and it seems from these letters from Paul that this was mostly a **Gentile congregation**. With its rough surroundings and citizenry, these congregants did not leave their personalities or habits at the door when they gathered for prayer or worship. We might say that they were a rowdy mess in **Sin City**.

Scholars point out that *First and Second Corinthians* represent a combination of surviving letters, probably three or four, out of five or six total that went back and forth from the church in Corinth to **Paul**. And, we know that Paul had spent some time there, because he told us that in his own writings (*1 Corinthians 2*). So, I doubt that Paul was surprised about the type, hype, or scope of the **controversies** that were going on in the church there. He addressed many issues in his letters to Corinth. Certainly, anyone reading the entirety of *First and Second Corinthians*, as we have them recorded in our Protestant *Bibles*, would understand that this was a raucous and chaotic crowd. The situation might be described today as: **fluid!**

Regardless, in the opening verses Paul offers his usual gracious greeting. But, he settles into a scolding of the church members and, very likely, their leaders.

Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you?  
Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

1 Corinthians 1:13 NRSV

Paul isn't finished. He starts adding to the heap of coals being placed on the heads of his listeners, using words dripping with even more biting sarcasm. If you step back, you might pick up some humor at the expense of the Corinthians, which would be another form of ridicule of their behavior:

I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)

1 Corinthians 1:14-16 NRSV

And, typical for Paul he lights into a profound statement that covers his intention for this letter and its **instruction** to everyone. The rhetoric, or formal teaching, he delivered applied to the events on hand in Corinth. Later, this would form some of the practical theology that we incorporate into pastoral care.

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

1 Corinthians 1:17 NRSV

And, then he delivers the **final summary** statement that should remain with those receiving his words, both then and today:

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.

1 Corinthians 1:18 NRSV

So, Paul is pushing the concern that he has for these followers of Christ to a level that arches over and beyond the **petty arguments** that seem so unsolvable in Corinth. At the heart is the subject of **power**. If we think only in secular, or common, terms, then the pagans and the poor would understand power as the **might of Rome**, which had been ruling their existence and their government for over 200 years. For those who had converted from Judaism to the new faith of the Christians, power would relate to **God** and the centuries of **teachings** about God which had been laid out in the Hebrew scriptures. And, those who wandered in from points beyond the reach of Rome would be trying to tie it all together, since all of this was “news” to them.

But, **Paul** knows his audience. He lived among them for two years or more. Being leader with vision, Paul was bringing up the basis for **belief for everyone** concerned: the **power of God**. And, that is directly related to the **sovereignty** of God, which means that God is **Ruler of All**. But, there was a lot of opposition to this concept among the people in Corinth, because the Romans promoted the various religions that they adopted from Greek society after conquering them.

But, Paul made an unusual comparison, which superficially is more of a contrast with a yawning gulf between the two ideas. Being a **convert** from Judaism, he knows that **Christ** is the major force putting all of this in play. For the Romans, the merchants, and their slaves and servants, the cross was an **humiliation** associated with horrible **death and punishment**.

Initially, those who followed Jesus saw it the same way. The charismatic leader, whom they identified as the Messiah, was **crucified and died** the typical agonizing death that was intended by those who executed him: the Romans. And, if that was all there was to the story of Jesus Christ, then everything that existed in the teachings of Jesus that day in Palestine would have been lost forever. The disheartened followers of Jesus experienced heartache, emptiness, and a feeling of abandonment for nearly two full days. Had things remained the same, it likely would have been the **end of the movement** created by Jesus through his **ministry**.

But, all of us here today, and nearly the entire world, know that the story certainly did not end with the **death of Jesus** that day. The amazing **power of God** was in play: **God raised Jesus** from the dead. **Jesus appeared** among the disciples. **Jesus remained** among his followers for a period of time, continuing to instruct them and **encourage** them. Jesus gave them the **Holy Spirit** from God, and **the church of Jesus Christ** was called into being. And, perhaps most dramatically of all the Risen Christ **ascended into heaven** to reign with God forever.

So, Paul is saying rather directly that if someone has that knowledge of the **power of God** in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, which is the heart of **the Gospel**, then the **cross** is not a sign of shame or a symbol of oppression. Instead, it is the important symbol of hope, **rebirth**, and empowerment of **all believers**. Through the ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ, we have full evidence that **God knows** about the plight of the common people and that there is **no preference** for the wealthy or those who are outwardly righteous. Those who are oppressed are fully recognized and cherished by God through Jesus Christ.

Through the **humanity** of Jesus, the world now has the knowledge and perspective that **God understands** the hearts and minds of all humankind and welcomes the prayers, concerns, grief, and anguish of everyone. And, those who believe in Christ receive comfort, **strength**, endurance, and a **peace that surpasses all understanding** (*Philippians 4:7*).

If you read enough of the authentic **letters of Paul**, you quickly learn that he can be pretty **difficult and stubborn**; and, these letters to the church in Corinth are pretty good examples of this. He picks on those writing to him and levels the playing field by redefining the ground rules. To the nonbelievers, the pagans, the educated, the politically powerful, and the Roman rulers, the cross appears as a piece of total **foolishness** and shame. But, as Paul tells the church at Corinth this is actually the **power of God** at work and on full display to the world.

So, there is **foolishness in the cross**. That is how the world views it, and many reading this may feel that same way. But, Paul is telling us that there is **something deeper** here, and it is not limited to this symbol of **crucifixion and death** that was the cross. Instead, Paul points to Christ **through the cross**. And, as nearly every Protestant congregation displays it the cross remains bare and plain, because Christ is no longer upon it. Remember the words from the Apostles Creed:

He was buried and on the third day he rose from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God, the Father Almighty.

Yes, **Christ died** at the hands of mortal and quite ordinary human beings, who wielded political and military might. And, he remained dead, for a while. But, his death was temporary just as the Roman Empire's power and might turned out to be temporary and unsustainable. Despite the squabbling in the church in Corinth, the significance of **God's power** is shown to all the world through the resurrection and **ascension of Christ**. As a symbol of the Good News that is the Gospel, the cross represents the **real, eternal power** of God's might, God's will, and God's work in this, **God's kingdom**.

The apostle Paul addressed many concerns in these letters to the church in Corinth. He understood the deeper and more significant **message for the early church**, and it still applies to us today. So often, we are just like the Corinthians, spending our time fretting and worrying, when we should be focusing on **the future** and serving the **needs of others**. All of these very human concerns of details in being the church begin to fall to the side before the cross and the **foolishness** that is our faith in God: through **Jesus Christ**.

Stan Reid      © 2020