

3rd Sunday after Epiphany A 22 January 2023

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Ὁ λόγος γὰρ ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ τοῖς μὲν ἀπολλυμένοις μωρία ἐστὶν τοῖς δὲ σωζόμενοις ἡμῖν δύναμις Θεοῦ ἐστὶν (1 Corinthians 1:18).

For the message about [word of] the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those of us who are being saved it is the power of God. Let's pray:

Some people imagine that the gospel isn't powerful enough to spread itself and somehow requires the help of human logic, eloquent language, rhetorical devices, talent, novelty or some other external power to nurse it along. Piffle! Not according to Paul. He talks about the cross of Christ itself - the power of God. Paul could speak with power and energy yet he used plain speech so that his teaching relied on the doctrine itself; not his language, style, or delivery. Paul himself says, "My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God" (1 Corinthians 2:4,5).

Paul preached the word of the cross.

Before anything else, the gospel is "the word of the cross." The cross has one uniform teaching. One gospel, one God, one atonement, one Saviour. There's no gospel under heaven but the gospel of Jesus Christ. He alone declared, "It is finished" from the cross, and then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit (John 19:30).

The word of the cross is, "Believe and live!" – 'The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved' (Romans 10:8,9).

God has spoken, therefore, our preaching is nothing but “the word of the cross”; the word of the crucified Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us.

God loves people. God delights in mercy. Although God loves righteousness and hates wickedness, he loves us so much that he gave his only Begotten to die that you and I, sinners, may live. What more could God have done to prove his love? ‘God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us’ (Romans 5:8). God’s love most profoundly displayed on the cross tells its own story. God has one Son, and he sent him to earth to take on our nature - ‘for our sake made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Corinthians 5:21). Indeed, ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life’ (John 3:16). The word of the cross is, “God is love” (1 John 4:8). He doesn’t will the death of sinners. God wills that sinners turn to him and live.

When you listen to the cross it tells you that the ransom is paid; the atonement is accepted; the law is magnified; justice is satisfied, and mercy is no longer bound by the unsatisfied demands of judgement.

When we listen to the cross it says, “Come, welcome! Guilty sinners, come, and welcome to the feast of mercy”, for in one earth-shaking, rock-splitting, and veil-tearing event, God both justified his law and displayed his love. Now, there’s free and full forgiveness — priceless blessings without price. Free pardon, free justification, perfect cleansing, complete salvation; these are gifts of grace bestowed upon we who are unworthy. This is the word of the cross - we are forgiven in a way that doesn’t violate the demand for justice. God is just. He is merciful and just to forgive us our sins. If we listen closely to the word of the cross, we’ll hear it reveal the most cherished murmurings of God’s heart, tender and overflowing with love for us.

Sadly, there are many to whom the word of the cross is “foolishness.” It’s foolishness to them; it’s beneath their contempt because, they say, “Everybody can understand it. Even the common people believe it’s true.”

But why is the gospel of the cross counted as foolishness? Because the gospel of the cross isn't the slave of human reason; rather, the gift of revelation. It originated with the very mind of God himself. The doctrine of the cross isn't a speculation. It's a revelation. It's God telling us something that we couldn't have otherwise worked out, and this doesn't suit the profound thinkers who can't stand being told anything. They don't understand that the doctrine of atonement never originated with man but was taught to him by God at the gates of Eden. The plan which blends vengeance and love was never invented by human imagination, but because God reveals himself in language that even small children may grasp, carnal pride calls it "foolishness."

The gospel sounds foolish to those who are perishing because it talks about things that they don't care about. If I could explain to a general audience how to make unlimited profit on the Stock Exchange, they'd look and listen with laser-focussed attention, and I'd be considered someone well worth listening to. But, if I were to preach the word of God, eternity, the soul, and the blood of Jesus — most people would walk away; not sure that they have souls, and refuse to contemplate eternity, which to them is an old wives' tale.

Those who are perishing call the word of the cross foolishness, because they regard the truth as an insignificant trifle. "Soul?" they muse. "What does it matter whether we have a soul or not? Sin— what's that but the babbling of simpletons?" Of all things, the eternal God is the greatest trifle to unbelievers. Many believe that there's a great master force in nature, or some higher cosmic power, but they won't entertain the thought of a personal God who commands obedience. These people think they don't need a personal God who loves them. God is a nonentity to them; so, when we speak of God as real, and sin as real, and heaven as real they mutter, "Foolishness." However, we who've entered into the realm of spiritual things through baptism, know the reality and power of the word of the cross.

The more we study the gospel the more we discover how endless and deep its wisdom is, and how very powerful it is. People's lives are totally turned. Unbelievers become devout, the immoral become pure, the dishonest become upright, the blasphemous become gracious, the unchaste become holy. Evil is quickly abandoned and repentant sinners strive for wholeness.

People in all ranks of society undergo a radical transformation — self-satisfied people are humbled by the discovery of their unworthiness, and others who were once steeped in immorality renounce their vices and seek happiness in the service of God.

Such change is shaped by the doctrine of the cross, and the power which accomplishes the change is the power of the Holy Spirit. Only divine power can effect so great a change. The word of the cross delivers us from the love of sin: sin is no longer our master; every chain of evil habit is broken. Sure, we fall again into sin, but we mourn over it, hate it, and bemoan ourselves for committing it. We've been delivered from the bondage of corruption, and made free to serve the Lord. Love him and delight in him, dear friends. The nearer you dare to approach him, the more you'll feel his power and his love. Saints, believe in the power of the cross to convert the souls of the lost around us. Don't think there's anyone beyond saving. The blood of Jesus is almighty. Don't think that any place is beyond redemption or any person too far gone: the word of the cross is the power of God to reclaim the lost. Believe in Christ crucified, speak his name boldly, and reflect the light of his truth and love in the community.

Trust God! Christ has died! Atonement is complete! God is satisfied! Peace is proclaimed! Heaven sparkles with mercy already bestowed upon ten thousand times ten thousand! Hell is trembling, heaven adoring, earth waiting. Onward Saints, to certain victory! We will prevail through the blood of the Lamb, the very Word of the cross, Jesus Christ. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus, the Word of the cross. Amen.