

FOCUS: The Good News is we are called to be united in Christ. (Second of a series of two sermons)

Epiphany is the season in which we focus on the manifestation, the making known, of Christ to the world. During the course of the season, the lessons appointed in the lectionary bring this idea to light. On the Day of the Epiphany, we heard of the Magi coming to the infant Jesus—a sign of Christ being made known to the Gentiles. In the ministry of John the Baptist, we heard the proclamation of the “One who was to come,” and a call on the people to repent. At the Baptism of Jesus, we heard the voice from heaven declare that Jesus was the “Beloved, the Son of God.” And so it is this season, culminating next Sunday as we celebrate the Transfiguration of Our Lord, in which we bring to a conclusion the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle.

In our second lesson, we have heard the words of Paul to the Christians gathered in Corinth. We have heard Paul give thanks for their ministry together, and for the work they continued to do after Paul left them to continue his missionary journey. We heard Paul express concern—perhaps even displeasure—that the community had become divided and placing personal glory and position above the work for which they were called by God. And today, we hear Paul remind them all that God has done for them while using that which is considered foolish or troublesome to make Christ’s purpose known, while using that which conventional wisdom considered to be wise appear to be the foolishness that human wisdom is in the sight of God.

So, we find God exactly where we don’t expect to find him. In the annals of human history, one does not find a culture—except Christianity—killing its gods. In fact, the very idea that a god—one considered to be immortal—would become fully human is foreign enough. To go the step further and see a god allow him or herself to be destroyed at the hands of mortals in the most horrific way possible—death by crucifixion—is unheard of and thought as totally foolish. Logically, things just don’t work that way.

In the context of the first century world, this made the Passion story appear foolish to the pagan Greek—Gentile, or non-Jewish—community. There was no wisdom—no logic—in worshipping a god that would look at his creation with so much love that the god would *choose* to take human form, be born of a human mother, live his life as a human being, take up the task of preaching and teaching to the people—particularly the people on the margins of the society: the sick, the possessed, the poor, the uneducated—and then allow himself to be arrested, tried, convicted, sentenced, and executed. To the non-Christian hearing this story in the first century, this was totally unbelievable to the point of being foolishness. The gods of Greece and Rome would *never* have allowed themselves to be destroyed. Why then, the first century Gentile would ask, would we *ever* want to believe in a god that would do something that foolish? What else might that god chose to do that was even *more* foolish?

And indeed, the cross *is* an odd, even foolish, place on which to find the Messiah—the Anointed One of God, because the Messiah was expected to come in power and might in order to free the Chosen People from captivity once and for all time, destroying or converting all the enemies of the One True and Living God. In the context of the first century, this made the Passion story a stumbling block to the Jews, because in the mind, the Messiah could not come as a “simple human being” or as a

servant, let alone be killed on the cross like a common criminal. It was extremely difficult for the Jews to see the Messiah, the one promised by God, to lead them by living and dying for them, rather than leading them as a mighty warrior. It is a stumbling block because they *knew* that God could do anything God chose to do, but that God would chose *this* manner in which to make himself known to them as the Messiah was hard to comprehend.

Paul's challenge, then, was to proclaim Christ crucified without getting in the way of the message. Paul was not one with great oratorical skills, so all he could do was to simply and clearly proclaim the gospel just as he had received it, and in doing so, step aside and allow the Holy Spirit to do that which the Holy Spirit does best—enter the mind and body and soul of the receiver, opening them up to the message being given to them, and illuminating the message so that Christ may be made known to the listener and in hearing the Word, they might come to a knowledge of God and all that God has done for them. In short, that in hearing, the listener might come to faith.

By simply delivering the message, Paul allows the Holy Spirit to carry the message to the listener, so that by the work of the Holy Spirit, the stumbling block might be overcome for the Jew and the foolishness see as wisdom by the Gentile. Because he simply declared the Word, without great public speaking skills or embellishment of the story, Paul could not be accused of building a church by personal glory or simply because he had a silver tongue.

Further, Paul proclaimed the gospel to those who would hear it. He didn't seek out the most powerful and influential citizens of Corinth and say to them, "You must be part of this community. It will be good for you and will lend prestige to the community as well as make me look good." No, Paul proclaimed the Word, and those who were open to the Holy Spirit responded to it, joining together in the community of Christians at Corinth. Power and status and glory had no place in the community at Corinth. Rather, God had used that which appeared to be foolish—building a community of faith *without* the leading citizens being a starting point, for example—and made it show the wisdom of God. By reaching out to those who weren't the wise, powerful, and all-knowing, God made the awesome power of God made known to those who saw it as foolishness.

Paul called on the community at Corinth to remain unified—to work and act together in one mind as the Body of Christ. In doing so, they would continue to demonstrate the glory of God through God's wisdom and power to take that which was considered foolishness by the world—a message of Christ crucified and Christ risen for the salvation of the world—and declare its wisdom. It wasn't an easy task for Paul and the Christians gathered in Corinth, but it was a challenge which they faced—and met—with the help of God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In our context today, we face many of the same challenges which Paul and other Christians faced in the first century. We live in a society in which Christianity is not the majority faith group. There are many who live outside of our faith community, or have no faith community or tradition in which to operate. To those totally unfamiliar with Christianity or Judaism, the foolishness of the cross is hard to understand. The Christian is called to tell the story as it is written, without the need for embellishment of great oratorical skills. The Christian is called to let the Holy Spirit do what the Holy Spirit does best—enter into the lives and souls and

minds of the one to whom the story is being told—believer and non-believer alike—and become a part of the life and thoughts of the one hearing the story.

We are called, as members of the Body of Christ, to make Christ known—to offer to the world little “epiphanies” or manifestations. In our actions toward one another, in our outreach into the community, in the openness of our physical structure here, and in all that we do in the eyes of those outside of our community of faith, we are making Christ known. We are allowing God to work through us to demonstrate that what is considered foolishness by human beings is actually the demonstration of the wisdom of God, and through that wisdom, God is made known to the people.

To those who are raised in the community of faith, the challenge to act for the glory of God, and not for personal glory or gain, must be met head-on. Knowing that we are sinful beings of God’s own creation, we must rely on the grace given to us by God. We have the visible signs of that grace in the signs offered to us in the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. In baptism, the Old Creature—the Old Adam and the Old Eve—are destroyed and we die Christ’s death and are reborn in Christ’s resurrection as children of God and co-heirs with Christ. We are called, just as the Corinthians were called, to be children of God and to proclaim the Good News that Jesus Christ, the Son of God and son of man, was sent by the Father to be born of a woman, to grow as a child, to preach and teach as a young man, to be arrested and condemned to die of the cross and finally to be resurrected from the dead as a sign of the final victory over death and the grave so that all who believe might not perish, but have everlasting life.

And why did God do all of these things? Why would God do something so foolish as come to earth as a human being and let himself be put to death by crucifixion? Why would God do something so foolish as provide for our salvation by taking the sins of the world upon himself? Why, oh why, would God so love the world—this motley bunch of his own creation—that he would give send his only Son to die for us?

Things which we human beings consider to be wise, important, and necessary—power, wealth, riches, glory, and the like—are foolishness in the eyes of God. None of these things bring us closer to God or to one another. On the other hand, those things which make to sense to you and me, those things which the “rational being” would call foolishness are just the things which God uses to show his wisdom, and through which the glory of God is made manifest to the world. God calls us by name and makes us his own. And then, God bestows on us the most foolish thing—grace—and in a move of even greater foolishness, declares to us that there is nothing—not one single thing—that we can do to earn or repay God for that grace, nor can we do anything to earn extra portions of it.

In the foolishness of loving sinners, God shows his wisdom. Because in the foolishness of this thing called grace, we who are among those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness.” We are among those who wish to be made righteous—to be justified or saved—before God. And the good news, my sisters and brothers, are that we are fed and our thirst is quenched at the Table with the visible sign of God’s grace, but we are eternally filled and quenched in the coming of God’s kingdom, where all, indeed, will dwell together in unity.