

HOW ODD OF GOD

I Corinthians 1:18-31

Paul was writing in the first century to people in the Greek city of Corinth. In their culture it was believed that successful people were those who excelled at wisdom and discernment. He commented on this by quoting from Isaiah (29:13-14) where the prophet wrote: “The Lord said: Because these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote; so I will again do amazing things with this people, shocking and amazing. The wisdom of their wise shall perish, and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden.” Those were words of God from centuries before. To this early church Paul wrote:

18 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. 19 For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” 20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

25 For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. 26 Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

God is forever making strange choices. God has always made peculiar selections. If you don’t believe me, just look around. So Paul reminded those in the early church in Corinth, “Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many powerful, not many of noble birth.” God seems to go for the losers, the left out, the last ones picked for anything. There is a line in a hymn you have sung but you may not thought about much. “Let every creature rise and bring peculiar honors to our king.” Some of us are over achievers in the peculiar.

God chose the Jews. Do you remember the little poem of uncertain origin: “How odd of God to choose the Jews.” It was an odd choice. Why not the power of Roman or the culture of the Greeks? Why not the innovation of the Chinese or the great builders of the Aztecs? And why the cross? It was after all the first century equivalent of an eclectic chair. What is the point of putting a savior on a cross? It was and is a stumbling block to many when they are asked to actually bare the weight of their cross.

Once at Oberammergau in Germany a husband and wife visited the place where their famous passion play is presented which enacts Jesus’ last hours. It is a play put on once a decade involving most of the town. The couple visited the vast set of the play and thought to take some pictures. With camera in hand the wife asked her husband to lift up the cross so she could get a picture of him carrying it. The husband reached down for the cross and was surprised when he found it was too heavy for him to lift.

The actor who was playing the part of Jesus happened by. The husband turned to him and said, “It is heavy. Why is it so heavy?” Replied the actor playing Christ in the Passion Play, “I could not play this part unless I felt the weight of the cross.” The weight of the cross can be surprising to people who look at the cross as little more than costume jewelry. It can be very hard to imagine actually carrying a cross that is so heavy, and to trust in the power of suffering and sacrifice.

Such a message is foolishness to the world, a stumbling block, too odd a notion. How can a man dying on a cross be of any help to me? Yet Paul said that our hope is not based on making Christianity a slick, saleable product, an easy faith we promote. During Lent we sing, “In the cross of Christ I glory.” Whenever Christianity has sought to glory in anything but the cross; whenever Christianity is identified more with success than with sacrifice; we risk missing the very heart of the gospel. The cross should remind us of how God gloried in the shame, the beating and the death of Jesus. How very, very odd of God.

First century Greeks considered the sophistication of wisdom and the power of discernment as of first importance, the way to measure success. One time a husband and his wife were discussing two men who were mentioned in the local news. The husband said, “Yes, I knew both of them when they were boys. One was a clever and relied on his handsome face and his charm. The other was a steady, hard worker. The clever one was left behind while the other worked hard and did well in business. When he died he left his widow millions.” The wife replied, “And I just read that the clever one is marrying the rich widow.”

There can be a lot of discomfort with things we are expected to believe than seem illogical, things that Jesus did like cure the blind and walk on water and raise the dead. I was once given to read a copy of the Jeffersonian Bible. To compile his version of the Bible Jefferson took a razor and some glue and cut out and pasted portions of the Bible that taught morals while leaving out all of the sections that had to do with miracles and things mystical. He had what he described as forty-six pages of “pure and unsophisticated doctrine.”

Jefferson called the writers of the New Testament “ignorant, unlettered men” who produced “superstitions, fanaticisms, and fabrications.” He called the Apostle Paul who wrote this letter to the Corinthians the “first corrupter of the doctrines of Jesus.” He dismissed the concept of the Trinity as “mere Abracadabra of the mountebanks (that is a charlatan) calling themselves the priests of Jesus.” He believed that the clergy used religion as a “mere contrivance to filch wealth and power to themselves” and that “in every country and in every age, the priest has been hostile to liberty.”

But this is the gospel we have whether anyone likes it or not. It was first spread not by the learned philosophers, those wise by worldly standards, not by wealthy rulers but by unlettered fishermen. Paul was not disparaging philosophy or wisdom as such, but the arrogant way people in that city valued their wisdom and their ability to discern things of the world. The Greek philosophers thought that the way to succeed in life was found through knowledge and understanding. But along came these odd, unlearned Christian preachers proclaiming that it is not how much you know that get things right between you and God. God is not impressed with how smart we are or think we are.

Some years ago someone gave me an article entitled “Snob Appeal.” It says, “Some people know so much about one thing they look down on those who aren’t so knowledgeable. They are snobs. There are wine snobs, art snobs, literary, fashion, food and even money snobs. ‘I can change the world!’ the politician boasts.’ ‘But he can’t even change a tire’ the garage mechanic sneers.’ Both are snobs because they look down on those who do not share their special interests. If you are sure you know more about haute cuisine than your dinner partner, remember she may know more about 19th century architecture. Don’t let your knowledge turn you into a snob.”

What Paul said is that the gospel, the good news from God, is not a philosophy, the finer points of which are to be considered as one would consider moves on a chess

board. The hope of the world is not the wisdom of the wise or the discernment of the discerning. Our hope is not with the collection of factual knowledge but our hope is in the cross.

We can understand why Jews were not looking for help from in a man nailed to a cross. Mostly we want hope that is visible, some observable proof, some clear evidence. The gospel records that the first miracle of Jesus' came at the wedding in Cana of Galilee when he turned water into wine. But as time went on he did fewer and fewer miracles because this caused people to look for the wrong thing.

Israel was a nation captured and controlled by Rome, not just captured by a foreign nation but people who believed in foreign gods. The Jews were understandably looking for a savior who would come to lead them to victory over the despised Romans. But the Christian message was counter to the common expectations, oddly proclaiming a savior who had come, not riding on a great war horse but on a lowly donkey, a savior crucified between two criminals as though he was a common criminal himself.

Paul refers to "the weakness of God." It seems more like an oxymoron, two words that do not belong together: God and weakness. Yet when God set out to save the world God foolishly relied on weakness where a baby's cradle and a criminal's cross became the vehicles of our salvation. God's own son was an outcast, born of peasant parents, his first crib a cows' eating trough, parents forced to flee the country under a threat of death, living his first years as a refugee, growing up in the nowhere town of Nazareth. Even on that Palm Sunday when a crown arrived to cheer him they quickly ran like scared rabbits when trouble came.

God always seems to make strange choices of those who are God's own faithful leaders. God chose the stuttering Moses to be God's spokesperson to Pharaoh and to lead the Israelites to freedom. God chose a violent, mean-spirited man named Saul, converted him, changed his name to Paul and made him the chief missionary of the church. God chose an amoral man named Augustine and made him into one of the most brilliant theologians in the early church. God chose a frightened and uncertain law student named Martin Luther and made him into the leader of the Reformation. And so it continues.

As Paul said, "Not many were wise or powerful or of noble birth." There were a few but precious few. Like Groucho Marx said that he would not join any organization what would have him as a member, you might not have wanted to join the first century church in Corinth. The church was not made up of the most

respected people in town. The members were not known for their education or social standing or political power or wealth and certainly not for good behavior.

We know some of them got drunk on the communion wine. Some of them were involved in sexual misbehavior. They were often quarrelsome and complaining and backbiting. They split into bickering factions, each group within that church in Corinth considering themselves better than the others. There was much pettiness and gossiping. They were not looked at with much favor by their contemporaries.

In fact somewhere in the second century a Greek philosopher named Celsus said of the appeal of Christianity, “Let no cultured person draw near, none wise, none sensible; but if any is a fool let him come boldly (into the church.)” Of the Christians themselves he wrote, “We see in their open houses: wool dresses, cobblers and fullers, the most uneducated and vulgar persons.” He added that the gathered church was “like a swarm of bats – or ants creeping out of their nest – or frogs holding a symposium round a swamp – or worms in assembly in a corner of mud.” That was how the early church was viewed.

God’s ways are not our ways. God’s thoughts are not our thoughts. What is a foolish choice to us is just what God had chosen. Not many of us are considered intellectuals, not many powerful, not many of high social standing. But as strange as it may sound, for all our problems, for all our limitations, for all our self-doubts, we are the very ones God calls to be the church.

There are the words in one of the hymns by Isaac Watts: “Where reason fails with all her power, there faith prevails and love adores.” It is not the wisdom of the world but the wisdom of God. You may remember General Omar Bradley, an American general during World War II, highly decorated and highly respected, instrumental in the success of the Normandy campaign. Maybe you also remember the words of General Bradley: “We have too many (people) of science and too few (people) of God. We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount.” We follow a God whose ways are not our ways.

There is a legend about the time when God was setting out to choose one people to be God’s own people. God went to the Greeks and said, “If I will be your God and you will be my people, what will you do for me?” The Greeks said, “If you will be our God and we become your people we will use our brilliant philosophy to make your existence the most logical and wisest of all possible choices.” And God said, “Thank you,” and went on.

God went to the Romans and said, "If I will be your God and you will be my people, what will you do for me?" The Romans said, "If you will be our God and we become your people we will use our armies, the greatest world has ever know, and with a sword force all people to bow down before you." And God said, "Thank you," and went on.

God went to the Chinese and said, "If I will be your God and you will be my people, what will you do for me?" The Chinese said, "If you will be our God and we become your people we will use our all of our greatest creative inventions to demonstrate what people can do to show the great creative possibilities of the world." And God said, "Thank you," and went on.

God went to the Aztecs and said, "If I will be your God and you will be my people, what will you do for me?" The Aztecs said, "If you will be our God and we become your people we will use our great advanced building skills we developed over centuries and will build magnificent buildings and gardens that people will marvel in centuries later." And God said, "Thank you," and went on.

Finally God came to the Jews. Again God said, "If I will be your God and you will be my people, what will you do for me?" The Jews said, "We are not brilliant philosophers like the Greeks. We have no mighty armies like the Romans. We are not great inventors like the Chinese. We are not great builders like the Aztecs. But if you will be our God and we will be your people we will tell all the world about all of your wonder deeds." And God said, "It's a deal."

Oh God, who comes to us in weakness and foolishness, help us to understand that behind what we see and can comprehend is a still greater wisdom and power. Help us to trust in the power which the world cannot understand neither can it take away. Amen.

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