

CHRIST CRUCIFIED

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Fourth Sunday in Epiphany (Series A)

January 29, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The epistle lesson comes from *Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, chapter 1, verses 18 through 31. In this scripture reading, in this Scripture reading, the apostle Paul centers our attention on what is most important. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From 1 Corinthians 1, beginning at verse 18, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly 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, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly 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, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

What is victory? What does it mean to have power or wisdom? This world has certain standards of power and wisdom. It has a certain vision of winning. But God's standards of power, wisdom, and victory are much different. God's standards are so much different that they look like weakness, foolishness, and defeat.

You can win at a whole bunch of things. When we think of victory, we might think of tanks, rolling through Europe, with American soldiers waving American flags, signaling that the Nazi regime had fallen. Victory might be a Super Bowl ring. It could be good grades, being accepted into a prestigious college, or getting a promotion over the others employees in your department. Maybe it's a big house surrounded by a perfectly manicured lawn, so that everyone can see, you

won the game of life. Maybe for you it's the fastest car, the biggest boat, your perfectly behaved children, or any other kind of trophy.

These are pictures of victory, power, and wisdom. And all these things are good. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with them. But these are human images of victory. In the formula of this world, fifty percent of winning is making someone else lose.

But what is God's picture of victory? What do his wisdom and power look like? What is the Christian image of victory?

Someone asked me once, concerning my Christian life, if I was living in victory. I knew what he meant, but I didn't really like the question. He meant, "Do you have your sin under control?" The answer to such a question is purely subjective. Nobody really has their sin under control. Maybe you could say that you have it more under control compared to the average Christian, but I don't even know how someone would begin to measure that. So I was annoyed by the question, and I just wanted to move on, so I said, "Yes," which was probably a lie. But what if the answer to that question is, "No"? What if you don't have your sin under control? What if you have less control over it than the average Christian? What if it's beating you up? Does that mean you're not victorious? Does it mean you're a loser? Are you failing at Christianity? This is a very worldly way to think about Christianity. And it's a really bad way of thinking, because it makes Christianity about I do. It makes faith all about me, which is no faith at all.

The true Christian understanding of victory is completely different. You know what the Christian picture of victory is? It's a dead guy, hanging beaten, bloodied, naked, and humiliated on a Roman cross. That is what wisdom and power look like. That is our image of victory. It sounds kind of weird, even foolish.

And let me ask you another question. What is at the center of our faith?

Suppose someone who doesn't know anything about Christianity were to ask you, "What is Christianity all about?" what would you say?

We should all be longing for someone to ask us such a question. And the answer for us should be quick and effortless. We shouldn't even have to think about it. It should roll off our tongues as if it had been sitting there waiting for the right moment to be released. Our individual answers to that question might not be word-for-word identical, but they should at least be close.

Now, if you're struggling to come up with what you would say, or if your answer ends up being different from what Paul teaches in this passage, don't beat yourself up. It's common for Christians to stumble over this question. We shouldn't; but we do. We might hear many different answers to this question, and it can confuse us sometimes.

But we should all be ready to say something like this: *Christianity is about Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins.* That is what Christianity is all about. And if someone asks you what the Bible is about, same answer: *Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins.* If someone asks you what Lutheran doctrine is about, or what our congregation is about, same answer: *Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins.*

So if you need an answer for when someone asks you about your faith, or for whenever you have an opportunity to let these words roll off your tongue, memorize these ten words. Write them down. Don't forget them. *Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins.* And then be ready to explain what that means.

And if ten words is too much for you to memorize and remember, start with two. Because in two words, Paul condenses his message down to this: *Christ crucified.* He says, "Jews demand

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signs and Greeks seek wisdom, *but we preach Christ crucified*" (1:22-23). This is the heart and soul of our faith. This is everything to us.

If a pastor, or a Christian leader, or even an angel from heaven (Gal. 1:8) should teach you otherwise, leave that person and their teaching alone. Shut off the radio. Put down the book. Walk out of the service. If anyone ever presents Christianity to you as something other than what Jesus Christ did for you in his death and resurrection, that teaching is not Christian.

It is tempting to gloss over the offense of the cross. It is tempting to put forward something that seems more powerful or wise, because the cross looks weak and foolish. Surely we can do better than the cross. We must be able to come up with something more appealing to people, right? But this horrific event that looks so pathetic is the power of God. *Christ crucified*.

This is the heart and soul of our faith. The cross is the center of our theology. It's the event that gives meaning to everything else. If the event of the cross is not the center of our doctrine and life together, everything falls apart, and Christianity becomes worthless.

Now, when we say the cross is the main thing, we do not mean it is the only thing. There are other articles of doctrine, and there are moral absolutes we uphold. So the cross is not the only thing you hear from a Christian pulpit. But you should never hear anything without also hearing what the cross has to say about it. If a particular teaching is divorced from the cross of Christ, it cannot rightly be called "Christian."

We can think of Christian doctrine and life using the imagery of an old wagon wheel. The center of the wheel is the event of the cross. And we should also include the events surrounding the cross. We're talking about the beatings Jesus endured, the crucifixion itself, Jesus' death, his burial, and, of course, his resurrection from the dead. These events of his passion are the center, or the hub, of the wheel. And everything else in Christian doctrine and life is a spoke connected to the hub.

If any spoke of a wheel is not connected to the hub, it is worthless. And all of Christian doctrine and life is the same way. If we talk about Baptism, the Lord's Supper, prayer, the Holy Spirit, eternal life, or any other article of faith, without showing how it is a gift to us through Jesus' death and resurrection, then it cannot rightly be called "Christian." And if we talk about good works without connecting our behavior to our identity as baptized and forgiven children of God, then the teaching cannot rightly be called "Christian." The cross is the center of our doctrine and life together.

This is why, as Paul begins to settle the divisions in the congregation at Corinth, he begins with the foundation of the cross. The cross means everything to us. Christ crucified is the wisdom and power of God (1:24).

So we should think about this phrase, "Christ crucified." What is so foolish and weak about it? Why is it "a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1:23)?

Consider the term *Christ*. It's a Greek word that means "Anointed One." It's the same as the Hebrew word *Messiah*. The Jews were waiting for God's Anointed One to come.

In the Old Testament, significant leaders were anointed. Kings were the primary ones anointed, but also priests, and sometimes prophets. But Kings were the most significant. First, Saul was anointed by the prophet Samuel to be king over Israel (1 Sam. 10). And when God rejected Saul, David was anointed to be the new king (1 Sam. 16). And after David, his son Solomon was anointed (1 Kings 1:39).

So the Jews expected the Christ, the final and ultimate Anointed One, to be a king. And they were right. Jesus Christ *is* a king. But he wasn't exactly the kind of king they expected. Remember where we finally see Jesus publicly identified as "The King of the Jews." It's at his crucifixion, when Pilate orders for a sign to be placed above Jesus' head that reads, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (John 19:19).

If you're wondering what the King of the Jews looks like, consider what was hanging beneath that sign.

So imagine that you're a Jew in ancient Israel. And you're waiting for the Messiah to come. You're waiting for the promised king to come. Many of the Jews expected the Messiah to overthrow the oppressive Roman occupation of the Promised Land. This, they thought, was their big problem. Then Jesus comes along and proclaims himself to be the Messiah. And he does some pretty spectacular miracles to prove it. So far, so good. Some of the people are getting excited.

But then the cross happens. He gets arrested, beaten, and humiliated by the Roman government, and then they kill him. Instead of overthrowing the Roman occupation of Israel, Rome executes this so-called king.

So you see how the cross would be a stumbling block to Jews. Suppose you were one of them, and you were on the fence about whether or not Jesus was really the Messiah. When he gets strung up and killed by the government you thought he was supposed to overthrow, you would conclude that, apparently, he wasn't the Messiah. Or if you were a believer, your hopes would be dashed to pieces.

And it's not just the fact that he was killed, but also how he was killed. He was hung on a cross. This method of execution was a stumbling block to Jews. It meant that a person was cursed. Back in Deuteronomy, God said, "If a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God" (Deut. 21:22-23). So a Jew might look at Jesus on the cross and say, "Obviously he's not the anointed of God, because he's cursed by God." The cross was a stumbling block to Jews, and we can understand why.

And then to the rest of the world, it just seems foolish. The cross is the ultimate picture of shame, weakness, and defeat. To find our victory in this seems utterly foolish. Why would we place our hopes in a guy who either can't or won't save himself? What makes us think he can or will save us?

Here's a man wearing little more than a crown of thorns pressed onto his head, with nails in his outstretched hands and in his feet to hold him to this rough wooden cross, with lacerations in his back so deep you can see his ribs, with blood flowing from these various wounds and covering his dying flesh, and crying out in agony, even complaining to God, "**Why have you forsaken me?**" (Matt. 27:46) Picture that.

This is the Christian picture of salvation. This is what we call deliverance. Now tell me that doesn't sound foolish. We sound like fools when we sing "In the Cross of Christ I Glory." That's shorthand for saying, "I glory in a dead Jew hanging naked, beaten, bloodied, and humiliated on a Roman instrument of execution." That's ridiculous! There is nothing wise or powerful about that picture.

If you want something the rest of the world will think is wise and powerful, if you want something your friends and neighbors will respect you for, you're going to have to find

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something other than the cross. But if you want forgiveness for your sins, if you want a salvation that will carry you through death and into life, you will find it nowhere else.

If our greatest problem is that we don't have enough power, if our problem is that we don't have enough friends, or our houses aren't big enough, or we don't know how to be rich and successful, if those are our problems, then the cross is foolishness. It doesn't do anything for us.

But if our problem is "that we are by nature sinful and unclean, and that we have sinned against [God] in thought, word, and deed," then the cross is the wisdom and power of God.

So let's look beyond the momentary problems of this life and consider our eternal salvation. How will we stand before God on the judgment day? When every thought, word, and deed is revealed before the Almighty, what will become of us?

If our problem is our own sinful rebellion, then we are wise to place our hopes in a dying Messiah who refuses to save himself. The cross is the wisdom and power of God, because this is where the Son of God, our Savior, took the sin of the world upon himself, suffered the wrath of God, and died. This is how he defeated sin, death, and the devil for all time.

This is why we call "Christ crucified" the wisdom and power of God. This is why the cross is the center of our faith.

So when we talk about *Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins*, we're not just talking about some random person's sins. We're not talking about sin in the abstract. We're talking about your sins, your real ones, the ones that plague you on a daily basis, the ones that haunt your conscience. *Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of your sins*.

This is what makes that horrifying image of a dead guy on a cross so beautiful.

Christ crucified—the wisdom and power of God. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.