

Wisdom and Foolishness
1 Corinthians 1:18-31
January 29, 2023
First Presbyterian, Luling

“Foolishness” appears several times in today’s passage, and I’ve been thinking about that word all week. It’s not a word I use very often, though I remember my grandmother throwing into conversations every once in a while. I don’t think it’s a word we hear very often, though it’s not so obsolete that we’ve forgotten what it means. Maybe it’s on its way to old-fashioned, but it’s in circulation often enough that we know it when we hear it. I consulted with a nearby young person, who knew what it meant and offered some synonyms. I’ve been thinking about ways that we might use it, and here’s what I’ve thought of.

We use it to mean naïve or gullible: It’s pure foolishness to trust that used car salesman when he says that car will run another 100,000 miles.

We use it to mean something like dangerous, or imprudent, uncautious, ill-advised. I do remember using it this way exactly: I could drive to San Angelo and back in one day, but I decided that would be foolish. Please note that I did it anyway. My young person consultant said “irresponsible” was a good synonym, and it fits in this category.

We use it to mean silliness. The principal’s foolishness in dyeing his hair for Crazy Hair Day at school at least made the students giggle. Young person consultant used “preposterous” as a synonym, which is definitely a fancy word for silly.

There are probably more ways that it’s used in everyday English. Paul is using it in a way that incorporates all of that plus a little bit more.

The Greek word there is the same root as our words “moron” and “moronic,” so it’s most certainly not a complimentary word.¹ Paul contrasts foolishness—God’s foolishness that is—with wisdom and power. Some people want the cultural value of wisdom. They want faith to make sense, to be logical, to be able to write it in an outline or a proof. That was a cultural value for the Corinthians—the ancient Greek and Roman art of rhetoric and philosophy was highly developed. They wanted to be able to express their faith in terms that would impress the intellectual heavyweights of their time. A savior who was crucified, of all things—well, that didn’t make any logical sense at all. Crucifixion

¹ The Jewish Annotated New Testament footnote, page 323

was reserved for the lowliest and poorest of criminals², and who wants to follow a lowly, poor criminal? There's no logic or rhetoric or wisdom that will explain that to any intellectual person's satisfaction. Paul says that's entirely the point. It's foolishness, God's foolishness, that doesn't conform to our idea of wisdom at all.

I think there's plenty of these folks around in our culture too, people who value what Paul called wisdom and I'm calling logic. They're both inside and outside of the church. Inside the church, these are the people who write thick books about theology, who want the four Gospels to agree on everything, who are trying to make faith fit into clear and consistent categories. Our own faith ancestor John Calvin falls into this category. Outside of the church, these people are the ones, often those who identify themselves as atheists, who point out all the inconsistencies in the Bible, who delight in highlighting the hypocrisy of Christians who preach one thing and do the opposite, who might actually be persuaded to trust in Jesus if someone could explain it to them in a way that makes perfect sense. Paul would say, well then it doesn't take any faith.

Paul employs a similar argument with power, or signs, or miraculous deeds. Some people want the cultural value of power. They want to be persuaded to believe because of what God can do for them in amazing and overwhelming ways, ways that can't be explained other than divine intervention. If miracles were available on demand, and if Jesus was divine, and if the divine is all powerful then how in the world was it that he couldn't miracle himself out of being executed? The crucifixion is a problem for those who need deeds of power as much as it is for those who need wisdom.

There are those who need faith to be expressed in deeds of power, but it's power translated into our culture: a church that is big and successful and rich with a rich pastor and connections to celebrities and politically powerful folks—that's what power means to us, more than calming a storm or healing a paralyzed person. People inside and outside of the church really and truly believe that is what faith is all about—success and power. So proclaiming the gospel of a crucified savior to them is, well, foolishness and folly.

The Corinthian church didn't have many people in it who were valued by their culture as wise or powerful. Paul says as much: "not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth." Maybe they were feeling bad about that. Maybe they were chasing those human standards, trying to become powerful and wise even if they couldn't change the circumstances of their birth. Paul says they're chasing the wrong thing.

² The Jewish Annotated New Testament footnote, page 323

God's message of salvation is foolishness. It doesn't make sense to the wise. It looks like weakness to the powerful. God chooses precisely those who are considered lowly to make the message of Christ made known. God's most foolish actions and decisions are actually wiser than the very wisest thing humans can come up with.

The Corinthians—we—are aspiring to the wrong kind of wisdom and power. Paul tells them and us to aspire to foolishness and weakness, as demonstrated in the cross.

I've been thinking about Lee Nelson this week. His birthday would have been on Wednesday. His favorite benediction was this: Go out into the world in peace; have courage; hold onto what is good; return no one evil for evil; support the weak; help the suffering; honor all people; love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Those words are comforting to us, but they're also foolish by the world's standards. Go in peace? Hold onto what is good? Return no one evil for evil? All hopelessly naïve and foolish. Support the weak, help the suffering, honor all people? Not brushing elbows with the powerful, that's for sure.

Love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power not of yourselves but of the Holy Spirit, and of Christ, the incarnated wisdom and power of God.

Be foolish. Jesus was so often foolish by human standards and calls us to foolishness, too.