

# Foolish Wisdom

a sermon based on

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

and delivered on

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4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany (Year A)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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Let's start today with a riddle. What are the wisest three words in the English language? {pause} This is easier than you probably think. *I don't know*. That's it. Those three words I don't know are the wisest words we can say.

Why would those three words be wise? Ignorance and wisdom sort of contradict one another. Here's the thing, though: saying, "I don't know," reveals not only self-awareness but humility. This isn't some new thought. Plato – the Greek Philosopher in *Apology* tells this account of Socrates' trial. Chserpho asked the oracle at Delphi if there were anyone wiser than Socrates. The priestess answered, "No one." Now Socrates himself doubted this and started to investigate and compare his knowledge to others from different fields finally convinced of his ignorance. At one point he seeks the counsel of an influential man (whom he refused to name) who was supposed to be wise but he himself was ignorant. What Socrates concludes "In this trifling particular, then, I appear to be wiser than he, because I do not fancy I know what I do not know."<sup>1</sup> Socrates whose greatest strength was wisdom could only realize that by acknowledging ignorance, a weakness, with those three wise words, "I don't know." Of course he would have said in two words, "*Δεν γνωρίζω (Den gnorízo)*," because he spoke Greek.

So what does this mean for us? In the passage from 1 Corinthians, today, we hear, "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," (1 Cor. 1:18) and later, "For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Cor. 1:22-24)

Why is the cross foolish to those who are perishing? Why is the cross a stumbling block to those who demand signs? Why is it foolishness to those who expect wisdom?

We hear the call for a sign at the cross in Matthew where it says, "Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.' In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, "I am God's Son."'" (Mt. 27:39-43) Even the one criminal hanging next to him said, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (Lk 23:39b)

If God is almighty, then how can he be killed? If God is almighty, why would he allow Jesus to die? What purpose does it really serve? If God is good, why does he allow evil? Have you ever heard those questions? Have you ever asked them? Couldn't God have chosen some other means to save us rather than this brutality?

The way the world works is that we demonstrate our significance by demonstrating our strength, our skill, our intelligence and hiding our flaws, our weakness and our ignorance – all to our own detriment. Where ever people live it seems as if we're all Texans, because Texans know that bigger is always better. Right? Yet David, who wasn't even strong enough to wear armor into battle, defeated the giant, Goliath with a small stone and a strap of leather. (1 Sam. 17:49)

Even in nature, the most potent things sometimes come in small packages. Do you know what the deadliest animal on earth is? The mosquito. In 2015 mosquitos caused 750,000 deaths. The next deadliest animal, snakes, 100,000 and then dogs at 35,000. Lions only about 22 and sharks only six.<sup>2</sup> But of which are we typically more afraid? Lions or mosquitos? Sharks or dogs?

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Apology* (Philadelphia: David Mokay, 1897) digitized copy [https://archive.org/stream/platosapologycr00broogoog/platosapologycr00broogoog\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/platosapologycr00broogoog/platosapologycr00broogoog_djvu.txt) (Accessed February 1, 2020)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sciencealert.com/what-are-the-worlds-15-deadliest-animals>

Mosquitos don't actually kill anyone though. Do they? It's what's within them that gives them their power for destruction. Right? We're fortunate that in North America we don't have to worry about malaria which cause the majority of those mosquito deaths. But that's only because we recognized the threat and were able to overcome it.

The cross is foolish for a few reasons:

The first reason isn't entirely obvious. It has nothing to do the actual cross. The cross is foolish to those who are perishing, because they don't even realize that they are perishing. Even in the church there are people who deny that there is personal sin. I was at a seminar about six years ago in which an ordained United Methodist minister told us (It was a clergy gathering.) that we needed to quit talking about sin because that hurts people's feelings, and instead talk about overcoming mistakes. I was mortified. A mistake is when you forget to carry a one when adding numbers, claiming that two plus two actually equals six is another matter entirely. Mistakes imply that we're trying to do the right thing but err. Sin happens when we act like we get to decide good and evil. What was the first sin? Do you remember? Adam and Eve eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge so that they could decide good and evil instead of just trusting God. (Gen. 3:1-6) Denying that sin exists or hiding our sin doesn't make us righteous any more than hiding our ignorance makes us wise.

Another reason the cross is foolish, is because it implies weakness. If Jesus died on the cross for my sake, that means I'm impotent to make things right myself. But we can't. We can't undo our sin. We can't undo our betrayal. Even accepting God's mercy seems weak. Maybe that's why God chose the cross. He chose to save us through an act of weakness and humility, so that we could accept that the fact that he just wants us to be the goodness that he intended.

Even in the Beatitudes that we heard today, It's in weakness that Jesus points to blessing, because only those who acknowledge grief are able to claim comfort, only those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness will seek it, only those who are merciful recognize the power or mercy.

Our foolish wisdom is this: Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, proving God's love for us not in an act of power but in claiming our frailty so that we might avail ourselves of his mercy, and the power that comes by allowing the Holy Spirit to live through us. AMEN.