

A “Foolish” Word – the Only Way to Unity!

3rd Sun. after Epiphany – 01/22/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 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.”**

Introduction

✘ It's clear from the very beginning of the Apostle Paul's letter that his mission; his goal for these new Christians in the town of Corinth is first that they understand the significance of God's saving grace at work in each one of their lives, and second, that they all will be united with each other just as they are united to Christ.

→ And Jesus Christ's primary means for uniting souls to Himself is His powerful and transforming work of baptism. When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, he said this in chapter 6:3-5, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His”.

→ Did you hear what he said there about baptism and unity? We are doubly united through that powerful Water-and-Word action of God. We are united with Him in His death and we are united with Him in His resurrection to new life.

✘ And it's the same unifying action of grace for each and every person that is baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. When it happens according to Christ's institution, no one's baptism is any more effective; any stronger or weaker or different than anyone else's.

→ That means that everyone who is baptized is then supposed to be united with each other ... in their salvation through Jesus Christ! That was the case in Paul's day as he spread the Gospel of Jesus throughout the people and nations of southern Europe and western Asia, and it is still the case around the world right now today!

I. The Problem – Division and Darkness in the Church

✘ But, in verse 11 Paul says that he has received word that there is “quarreling” and “division” among the Christians in the Corinthian church.

→ The Greek word for “quarreling” is “ἔριδος” (eridos) which refers to “conflict as the result of rivalry and discord”. And the word for “division” that Paul uses in verse 10 is “σχίσματος” (where we get the English word “schism”) which is used to describe the “tearing of cloth” into separate pieces.

→ Sadly, verse 12 tells us that the cause of this “tearing apart” within the believers is connected to some kind of rivalry around who it was that had performed their baptisms. They were picking favorites among the pastors and evangelists and forming factions and cliques. One person said that he was somehow a better, more pious Christian because he was baptized by Apollos while another believed she was better because she was baptized by Cephas.

→ It's really no different than the way that believers today choose churches that have the same confession of faith because “Pastor Jones is ‘better’ than Pastor Smith”. Most of you have heard me say multiple times that “if you choose this church or any other church because of the pastor, then you are choosing that church for the wrong reason”. And look, the fault lies both

with the people and the pastors, because we pastors likewise must never bring attention to ourselves. But instead always and only point the people to Christ alone!

- ✘ Beyond the favoritism toward certain pastors, Paul uncovers the problem that by placing so much importance upon who performed their baptism, the people are completely in the dark about what baptism is and who it is that's really doing the work in baptism. It's a place of darkness where a large number of people and churches still remain to this day, in fact.

→ First of all, we must always remember that baptism is 100% God's work and not man's. In verse 14, Paul even says that he is glad that he didn't baptize most of the people in Corinth so that they wouldn't be tempted to say, "I was baptized in the name of Paul". So hear me well on this my dear people of Christ, "The pastor who baptizes, confirms, marries or currently teaches you is completely unimportant!"

→ All that matters in baptism, number two, is that in God's water-and-Word act of grace you are united with Jesus Christ; united with His teaching; united with His saving death on the cross for you; united with His life-giving resurrection for you and united with Him in His Church that teaches His Word and administers His sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion according to His institution in Holy Scripture!

- ✘ Paul even mentions in verse 17 that it's never to be about some dynamic preacher's style or charisma in the church. Paul says that preaching with what he calls "eloquent wisdom" can potentially become a roadblock to saving faith.

→ Not that any of us pastors should intentionally try to be boring or speak in a manner that makes it hard for the listener to follow and understand, but a message that is more about being cutesy and filled with human cleverness and creativity can so easily be used by Satan to make people focus upon the man who is preaching to the point that his message can end up completely lost.

→ Paul says in verse 17 that it's then that "the cross of Christ" can actually end up "emptied of its power"!

- ✘ When this happens, those in conflict; that is in the darkness of sin are not helped and so they remain in the darkness of unbelief – even if or when they "think" they are saved just because they are sitting in a pew every Sunday.

II. God's Solution – A 'Foolish' Word and Light

- ✘ But Paul blesses us here in our text this morning by shining a bright light upon the solution; God's solution, which is the cross of His Son Jesus!

→ The sad fact though is that those who can't turn their focus away from the things of this earthly existence; away from the personalities and accomplishments of mankind, see and hear God's teaching about the Cross of Christ in the Bible as being utter foolishness.

- ✘ I hesitate to tell you this because of how you will likely respond but I feel like I must share it:

You see, I had a new revelation; an Epiphany this week. It is this: that Owen over here in the second pew is actually your ticket to salvation and eternal life. That's right, Owen, though he's done nothing to deserve it, is actually going to be arrested, put on trial, found guilty and put to death in the electric chair.

And all that you have to do is believe that his death will make all of the conflict between you and God because of your sin completely go away!

- Now, how would you all respond to that if I was actually serious and wasn't making it all up, which I am doing for the sake of an illustration? You'd say that my revelation about Owen and his electric-chair-death for our salvation is complete foolishness, right?
- ✘ Well, to so many people in Paul's day – and sadly still today – God's method of gaining and dispensing salvation and forgiveness exclusively through the perfect life, sacrifice and death of His Son Jesus on the cross is complete foolishness.
- And let's just be honest with each other for a moment. On the surface, the idea that anyone could actually be born as a human being through a mother who has never been with a man before is pretty impossible, right? And then to consider that that man would live a perfect life, never making even one mistake; never committing even one sin ever, that's even more crazy! And on top of it all, the idea that that man could somehow bear the sin-debt of every person ever to live on this planet and that His act of being tortured and nailed to a cross to die for our deserved punishment; and that the death of just this one man at that one point in history could cleanse us all from guilt and earn forgiveness and eternal salvation for every person who believes and trusts in this crazy plan and Savior – to be honest, from a purely human and worldly way of thinking, that really is a crazy idea! To believe in “the word of the cross is folly” as Paul says in verse 18.
- It is complete foolishness, which is why Satan jumps all over it and uses the world's labeling of us Christians as fools to make us fearful of sharing the word of Christ's cross with others around us; to make us ashamed to admit our convictions and faith in Jesus and His cross.
- ✘ But you see, God's answer and solution is God's answer and solution, not the world's. And God isn't required or bound to operate according to what “makes sense” to our human and worldly way of thinking. Paul says in the next chapter – chapter 2:14 of his letter that “The natural (wordly) person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned”. In other words, God never intended that these things had to make sense to our human reason, because they can only be grasped and only understood by faith! That's the beauty of it all; the wonder of God's work.
- If it were something that any and every human being could grasp or accomplish, then God would cease to be God. But because His plan and work for our salvation is something that only He can do by His miraculous power, then by faith it makes a lot more sense doesn't it?
- That's why Paul concludes with verse 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”. He also said in Roman 1:16, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek”.
- And so, as Paul says only a few verses after our text, so every faithful Christian pastor and Christian Church must also say, “we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1Cor. 1:23-24).
- ✘ The difference between how an unbeliever and a baptized believer in Christ views the word of the cross is as different as it is trying to get around in the dark compared to living in full daylight.
- There was a group of friends that went camping up in the mountains, but the hike to their campsite took longer than they expected so that it was completely dark on a night when the moon was covered by thick clouds when they arrived. As they approached the place, they all set down their packs and equipment and went into the woods to do their business.

→ No one wanted to take the time to dig their flashlights out because each one was confident that he/she could find their way back to the campsite without a light. Well, they started hearing the sounds of the woods at night – various animals scratching around and screeching and howling so that they became afraid to draw attention to themselves by yelling out for one another. And so, they hunkered down where they were at and shivered miserably through the entire night. They had no fire, no light, no source of comfort.

Finally, at sunrise the meadow where they planned to camp filled with light and each member of the group was shocked to see that they were all no more than 50 feet from one another. In the light they realized that they had no reason to be afraid that night, because all of their packs and supplies were right where they left them – less than 100 yards away!

✘ That's how it is when sinful men and women depend upon and believe in their own reason and the things of this world because they think that God's revelation and plan for salvation and eternal life in the cross of Christ is nothing but foolishness.

→ They separate from one another, become prideful and stubborn in the darkness of their unbelief so that often, just because they are afraid to be wrong, they outright reject Jesus Christ who said in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life".

Conclusion

✘ Remember, I told you that Paul used the Greek word, "σχίσματος" (schismatos) that describes the "tearing of cloth" when he urges the believers in Corinth to have no "divisions" among them?

→ Instead he urges them, and all of us today in verse 10 to "be united in the same mind and the same judgment", that is the mind of Christ and the judgement from the Father that because of our unity with Jesus in our baptism which binds us to His saving work on the cross, we are now innocent of all sin; fully forgiven to bask eternally in the brightness of His light and grace!

→ The Greek word for "unity" is "κατάρτισις" (katartisis) which speaks of people or things that are "joined or fitted together". It's even used to describe the "mending" of fishing nets.

✘ This is the miraculous power and work of the Gospel; of word of the cross. It takes each one of us, who have been torn apart from God and from one another in the darkness of our sin, and in the blood of Jesus, it mends all us back together with God the Father; it fits us perfectly into His Holy Church so that the word of the cross might be proclaimed and shared with one united voice, as the power of God for the salvation of all souls on earth.

→ May it be so for Jesus' sake. Amen.