

2018-03-04 Foolish Wisdom – Michael Cheuk  
Exodus 10:1-17; John 2:13-22; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25.

In today's New Testament Lesson, Paul was writing a letter to a church that he founded in Corinth, a major cosmopolitan city located in southern Greece. This church had followers of Jesus who were Jewish, but they also had followers who were of Greek and Roman descent. The Greek and Roman Christians prided themselves in philosophy, oratory and rhetoric, and they placed a lot of stock on their knowledge of spiritual matters. Some within that church considered themselves wise with special knowledge. As a result, they saw themselves as more spiritual than everyone else. This attitude caused conflict among the members, and divisions were tearing this church apart.

Paul addressed this problem in the church of Corinth by teaching the way of God's wisdom. Now, before I go on, let me make it clear that Paul was not against knowledge, scholarship, philosophy, or human wisdom. His point was that *God's* wisdom is not the same as human wisdom. God's wisdom was not the same as Jewish wisdom. For the Jews, they looked for salvation through a Messiah who could perform miraculous signs and wonders, a powerful liberator who could free his people from the Roman empire. That was the conventional wisdom of the Jews.

God's wisdom was not the same as Greek wisdom. For the Greeks, they looked for salvation through knowledge and wisdom. Socrates said, "The secret to a successful society is education. If we can just give everybody a good education, then it must follow that the world will get better and better." That was the convention wisdom of the Greeks.

Instead of the conventional wisdom of the Jews or Greek and Roman philosophers, Paul taught that the way of wisdom is the way of Christ crucified. Paul wrote: "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. The cross was a stumbling block to the Jews because it represented weakness and suffering. The Jewish mind regarded anyone "hung on a tree" as cursed by God (Deut. 21:23).

The cross was foolishness to the Greeks because no sane person would accept a brutal instrument of execution as the way to know the divine. For the Greeks, the gods were powerful and beautiful. It made no sense to them that divine wisdom came through the message of one Jewish peasant who was executed on a cross next to common criminals. No wonder Paul wrote that the message of the cross is foolishness!

But Paul wasn't making all this up about the scandal and foolishness of God's wisdom. Paul was only following the lead from his Lord, Jesus Christ. For those of us more than two thousand years removed from the historical Jesus, we often think Jesus one of the wisest men, if not **the** wisest man who ever lived. But the good, moral, and religious people of Jesus' day certainly did NOT see Jesus that way.

Wisdom is often about what's right and what's wrong, who's in and who's out, what's clean and unclean, what's pure and impure, who's my enemy and who's not. A quick reading of the gospels will tell you that Jesus spent his whole ministry blowing up the accepted conventional wisdom of his day. Conventional wisdom says: "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." The wisdom of God in Christ says: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). Conventional wisdom says: "Look out for number one." The wisdom of God in Christ says, "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first" (Matthew 19:30).

The first will be last? The greatest will be the least? Lose your life in order to gain it? The hated Samaritan is my neighbor? A ostracized leper is declared clean? No condemnation for a woman caught in adultery? These are teachings and actions not of a wise man, but a crazy lunatic.

What's more, the law-abiding Jews of Jesus' day were scandalized by Jesus and his disciples. Jesus broke the commandment to keep the Sabbath by healing sick people and gleaning food out in the fields. Jesus broke the commandment to honor his father and mother by saying, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). The moral people labeled Jesus a "glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors who stole from fellow Jews and of sinners." Jesus was a bad hombre!

And what's more bad and crazy than Jesus going to the temple and driving out all the vendors and sacrificial animals with a whip, and overturning the money exchange tables? Afterwards, when the Jews demanded for a sign that might justify his actions, Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The incredulous Jews thought this was crazy talk. In response, they said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" The Gospel writer John then explains: "But he (Jesus) was speaking of the temple of his body."

And what does **that** mean? John then basically confesses that the disciples had no idea what Jesus was saying until after Jesus was raised from the dead. It was only in light of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection that those words finally made sense to them.

As someone who went to grad school and who values knowledge *and* wisdom, I want my beliefs to make sense. I want my religion to have a basis in rationality. I want my spiritual credentials to be backed by my moral goodness and spiritual wisdom. And today, Paul is telling me that none of that is needed. What is needed is simply faith and trust in a God who was foolish enough to come to earth as a human being and scandalous enough to die on a cross. The cross challenges the conventional wisdom of those who think that one is saved *by what one knows*. They think: "If I believe certain doctrines and know how to say and pray the right things, then I am saved." Right beliefs and right knowledge are good and necessary, but they are not sufficient for salvation, for we are saved by the power of God's grace, not by the power of our beliefs or wisdom.

And so, as we continue the Lenten way, may we embrace God's foolish wisdom. We follow the way of Jesus, the way of the foolish cross. Christian songwriter/singer Michael Card wrote a song called "God's Own Fool" that eloquently illustrates this point:

It seems I've imagined Him all of my life  
As the wisest of all of mankind  
But if God's Holy wisdom is foolish to men  
He must have seemed out of His mind.  
For even His family said He was mad  
And the priest said a demon's to blame  
But God in the form of this angry young man  
Could not have seemed perfectly sane.

Come lose your life for a carpenter's son  
For a madman who died for a dream  
Then you'll have the faith His first followers had  
And you'll feel the weight of the beam  
So surrender the hunger to say you must know  
Have the courage to say, "I believe"  
For the power of paradox opens your eyes  
And blinds those who say they can see.

When we in our foolishness thought we were wise  
He played the fool and He opened our eyes  
When we in our weakness believed we were strong  
He became helpless to show we were wrong  
So we follow God's own Fool  
For only the foolish can tell  
Believe the unbelievable  
Come be a fool as well.

During this Lenten season, may we be God's own fool as we follow Christ's way of wisdom. Amen.