

Matthew 4:12-23 The Message of the Cross
1 Corinthians 1:10-18
February 1, 2026

It is good to be here this morning, in spite of the cold weather. If we had met last week, the epistle reading would have come from the 1st chapter of 1st Corinthians, like it did today, and the topic would have been about God's wisdom as it sits next to human wisdom. Which means that the passage for this week serves as a continuation of the same theme.

1st and 2nd Corinthians is the text for the Lenten Bible Study this year, and some of the readings between now and then will be read on Sunday mornings, which is fortunate because the Sunday worship and Bible Study can complement each other. This affords the opportunity, if you have not done so in awhile, to re-read the Corinthian correspondence of Paul in your daily readings.

It has always been the conviction of the Christian Faith that based on scripture, and on the observation of the world as people have experienced it, there is a gap of understanding between the ways of God and human ways. Actually, the idea pre-dates the Christian era.

In the 55th chapter of Isaiah we read;

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways

higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.’”

Even in the 2nd chapter of 1st Corinthians, Paul refers to the same idea by quoting from the 40th chapter of Isaiah, “who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?”

And at the beginning of 1st Corinthians, we see a conversation that takes the stakes higher, for we are told that the gap is not one of distance, but of kind.

What the gospel has revealed about the relationship between the human state of knowledge and the divine is not that God simply knows more, so that a gap emerges at the limit of human understanding and runs indefinitely until divine knowledge is somehow exhausted. Rather it is a conflict of opposites. Divine understanding is not merely more, but in some way distinct, different from, opposed.

Even in the 118th psalm, which is quoted all over the New Testament, we read;

“The stone the builders rejected, has become the cornerstone. *This is marvelous in our eyes.*”

In the words of verse eighteen;

“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.” I have always been drawn to this chapter, even though I'm unable to explain it any

better than Paul did when he composed it in the first place.

We have just begun once again making our way through the story the gospel tells about Jesus on the way to Good Friday. If we had met last week we would have read from the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew the account of the calling of the first disciples which is compatible with Paul's idea. It is four fishermen on the Sea of Galilee who are chosen and invited into the world of Jesus with this invitation, "come, follow me."

The wisdom of the world would have been to take up with the Pharisees or one of the other philosophical or theological schools of thought; to integrate himself into royal and imperial circles and find the best connected and best resourced and educational settings, from which to choose disciples; to administer psychological profiles and aptitude tests and selected the ones who scored the highest and demonstrated the right characteristics and interest.

Instead, Jesus heads down to the lake and picks four people who wouldn't have been able to get accepted into any of the academies much less the elite ones. Jesus will spend most of his time with people who are not a part of the ruling class.

This week we have moved on to the 5th chapter of Matthew, which is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. It begins, of course, with the Beatitudes. They

too are compatible with Paul's emphasis at the beginning of 1st Corinthians.

The blessed are not the successful and victorious in worldly terms, but the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those persecuted.

I suppose it is upon *us* to admit that in the main human wisdom works for us, not perfectly perhaps, but there is a powerful way in which human understanding works, and we will have to admit that it is so before we can understand what Paul meant in 1st Corinthians, or the reasons Jesus chose his disciples, or the power the Beatitudes holds over us.

Honesty compels us not to try too hard to explain what cross folly/wisdom means. All the illustrations fail us. It is natural to go to the situations where decisions are made against common sense or conventional wisdom.

A theology of the Cross is not common nor is it conventional. It is part of the grand mystery. Part of the mystery is that to live . . . one must die, to win . . . one must lose, to be rich . . . one must become poor, to be healthy . . . one must become sick at heart. When asked how this works, no answer satisfies.

Every illustration has a conventional logic. The cross simply does make sense in that way. If we accept it according to some provisional illustration, like when a

seed goes into the ground, it dies, and then comes to new life, we end up having to admit that only a seed that is alive in the first place, but dormant, can come to new life.

Then we are engaged in intellectual gymnastics that actually make sense out of it. All we are meant to know is that it is the power of God unto salvation. As Paul put it in 2nd Corinthians, “we live by faith and not by sight.” But we want to understand. We desire, sometimes desperately, for things to make sense.

We are being called to live by faith, which does not always make sense. It requires, among other things, a constant paying of attention to the divine voice, and a willingness to follow wherever that voice leads whether it makes sense to us or not. It didn’t make sense for Abraham to leave Harran for Canaan without an heir, nor to let Lot to have first choice; or for David to pick up the slingshot.

It didn’t make sense for Jesus to choose the cross, or for us to trust that choice. It *really is* folly, or a stumbling block. Yet we *are* so called. When we follow we are brought to the threshold of another realm, where life reigns, along with goodness and love. And somewhere deep in each of us, we know the message of the cross is true . . . truer than any of the other truths we know.

Perhaps like the psalmist, the best place to start is just to marvel before it. In a moment we will share the Lord’s Supper, a time for quiet reflection to think about

the cross and its wisdom as we share this sacred meal together.

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