

## 1 Cor. 1:18-25 God's Foolishness

I often receive compliments on a piece of jewelry which I rarely take off. Depending upon what I am wearing it may or may not be visible, but it is there and when thinking I will often hold it. I imagine most of you recognize that I am talking about the gold cross around my neck. The cross has long been a symbol of the Christian faith. We have one which stands on the Communion Table and one which hangs on the wall behind me. Both are beautiful. But the crosses out in the corner where Olney Church Road turns are more like the cross of Jesus would have looked—stark and unadorned. If you could time-travel an actual Roman from the days before Christianity to now and give him a tour around our world, there are of course a lot of things which would astound him—many marvels which might frighten him. But probably nothing would astound him more than the buildings which you might show him called “churches”. These buildings decorated inside and out with various versions of what he would call “the crux”, the Roman cross. Our imaginary Roman would be flabbergasted to see people wearing crosses like mine around their necks. What he would see would be like our seeing people wearing little replicas of electric chairs around their necks. It would be hard for him to see how this could be fashioned to be beautiful. The point here is that our Christian eyes have grown so accustomed to the cross that we are inured to the stark and jolting reality that it represents. Beautiful sanctuaries like ours have beautiful crosses. And lovely people wear beautiful crosses around their necks. When Paul wrote the words we have just read to those early believers in Corinth it was sometime in the middle of the First Century and the cross was still in use as a means of execution. Crosses were not yet decorating churches and necks. The cross still struck horror into hearts. It was Rome's method of extreme public torture used to shame and humiliate as well as to cause death—it was meant to ensure obedience; proof of Rome's power. And it struck terror into every heart except Christian hearts. For those early Christian believers the cross had come to mean something new---something that was, Ironically, lovely, delicate and beautiful---and powerful. In the passage just read, Paul recognizes this oddity. He says that for those who are not Christians; those he calls “those who are perishing”, this Christian understanding of the cross was foolish. But for those who believe, the cross represented something entirely different; for those who believe the cross represents the “power of God.” Paul sees the irony of this, the irony that an implement of imperial Roman power and shameful death would become a sign of life, a symbol of the love and power of God. It is important to understand that for Paul the cross did not simply stand for Jesus' death. And truly, Jesus' death is not all that it means to us today. The cross also stands for the whole way Christ LIVED. It stands for the way he lives again in Easter. The cross in front of you or the one around my neck or yours stands not so much for a death as it signifies the whole Christian way of being. The cross is the radically abbreviated symbol of Jesus Christ's way; his teachings, the way he related to others, his compassion, his love, and---indeed—his self-giving death, and most emphatically—the cross also stands for his triumph over death. The cross represents and is for Christianity the sign and symbol for the whole story of Jesus Christ. Not all Christian traditions prefer the cross of Protestants—the empty cross. The cross which is not empty is called a crucifix and portrays the body of the suffering Jesus. Sometimes perhaps we need to remember that suffering more clearly than we do, but the crucifix is obviously mostly about the

death of Jesus. That is crucial to the story of course, but it is not the whole story. An empty cross is about the whole sweep of Jesus' story:

An empty cross is about Jesus' self-giving way of life.

An empty cross is about Jesus' self-giving death.

And the empty cross is finally and most importantly about Jesus' victory over death.

So when you see or wear an empty cross, think not only on his death for your sake, but think on the compassion, the love, and the truth that flowed from his whole earthly life and think also about his victory over death at Easter. In our text, Paul admits that a lot of people just don't get this business of the cross. Not only did a lot of people not get it then, there are a lot of people who don't get it now. Paul offers two examples, both of which can be found around us today. First, he says the cross is a "stumbling block to Jews", who, quote, "demand signs". That is to day some people want outward miracles to prove God. Remember that Paul himself is a Jew, so he should know what he is talking about. In our day, the comic Woody Allen once said what amounts to the same thing when he quipped that he would believe if only God would offer him a sign—a sign like making a large deposit in his name in a Swiss bank account. In other words, there are folks, and they are many, who demand proof in some physical, concrete manner which they define and which they could not then attribute to another cause. It seems that God does not want to impose faith on us by dramatic outward signs. If God did that, our faith, instead of being an intimate condition of trust and dependence upon God, instead of being an internal and personal relationship with God, would become an intellectual position you were coerced into holding. God would then fall into the same category as gravity and a round earth. God would be pulled into our temporal system of things: a demonstrable, tamed, necessary, and impersonal fact. The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote a novel called "The Brothers Karamazov" which contains a poem within it. The poem is named "The Grand inquisitor" and is set in the midst of the Spanish Inquisition. In the poem, Christ returns to earth and is actually arrested by the Grand inquisitor. The Grand inquisitor knows who he is and wants to be rid of him. In one telling passage, the Grand Inquisitor accuse Christ this way: "You did not come down from the cross when they shouted to you, mocking and reviling you, 'Come down and we will believe...' You did not come down, because again you would not enslave man by a miracle, your craved faith given freely, not based on miracle." Like Dostoyevsky, the Apostle Paul is also saying that faith in God based on outward signs would not really be faith at all. After observing that some of his fellow Jews seem to want signs in order to believe, Paul then notes that Greeks want to find God with what he calls "wisdom". By "wisdom," Paul does not mean "good" wisdom. He means the endless armchair philosophical speculation that was part of the Greek intellectual scene. And by "Greeks," he doesn't mean just ethnic Greeks; he means the whole pagan Greco-Roman world of which Corinth was a major capital. In his commentary, William Barclay describes the Greco-Roman intellectual scene that prevailed in Corinth, the one Paul was referring to, this way: "You might hear...sophists, shouting and abusing each other...with their rhetoric...and many writers of books reading their stupid compositions or poems...soothsayers giving the meaning of unusual events and 10.000 rhetoricians twisting lawsuits. The Greeks were intoxicated with words." Sound like quite a side show: trying to prove God with words and logic. Our intellectual world seems to hold the opposite view in many respects. Our modern academic and intellectual worlds have often simply ruled discussion out of bounds—not a question for academia—God is

not on their curriculum. So...what does that mean? If God is not going to pressure us to belief with whiz-bang wonders, and if God cannot be found by the cleverness of Corinth and many today aren't even looking, then how can we know God? Paul answers the question for those in Corinth and for us. We know God by actually living the way of Christ, in his shorthand, by living the way of the cross. Paul writes, "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greek, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. The point is that believing in God is another kind of knowing. It's a way of knowing that honors the mind. It's reasonable, yet this way of knowing goes deeper than outward proof or mere empiricism. In this way of knowing, we actually live into faith. We take on the risk of believing even when everything may be far from clear. We make the leap of faith. Then, in the living out that faith (even if on the journey we have some doubts), we come to see in an interior and personal way that our life is profoundly illumined by the faith we have risked. In the living of it, we find that life is given meaning, defined, shaped and strengthened by that faith we have dared to commit to. In a commentary on this passage by Rev. Dr. Michael Lindvall, he made a comparison of this connection between faith and knowing using what he called the "logic of congruence". He said that in living the cross-shaped faith you discover this connection between life and faith. It all fits together. The story of a God whose love was so deep as to create and then redeem this strange world, the words Christ spoke, this story of his cross and resurrection, it fills the empty place within us as though it were custom-created to fit that empty place. Faith makes sense of life. Faith empowers life. Faith fills life with meaning. It is congruent. But...this is a truth that you only discover when we take that risk of trying to live the cross-shaped life ourselves. Albert Schweitzer was quoted as saying "Jesus comes to us as One unknown...He speaks to us the same word. 'Follow me' ...and to those who obey, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience, who he is." It is in our faithful experiences as we seek to follow Christ that we truly meet our Lord. Those who do not take this leap; those who look on from outside the experience retaining their self-centered understanding of life's meaning can only call this way of life which calls us to love others in self-giving ways foolish. But this is God's foolishness and it gives meaning and purpose to this life. This foolishness is to come to know God in a way deeper than any outward sign can demonstrate. This foolishness is to know God in a way that is higher than any mortal wisdom can impart. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.