

THE WISDOM AND POWER OF THE CROSS

1 Corinthians 1:22-25

If we think about it for a few moments, we can understand the predicament that confronted the early Christians, as they proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. They spoke of Christ's coming into the world, His splendid teachings, and His acts of healing. But most of all, they spoke of the cross. And the world simply could not understand the cross. It seemed like so much foolishness. That's what Paul says in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians: "For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness."

We can understand that. The Jews were looking for a very special kind of Messiah—a Messiah who would come as a great military hero. He would be a mighty warrior, riding a great white horse, leading Israel to victory over their ancient foes. The nerve of these Christian preachers to come along and say, "You do not need to look for a Messiah. The Messiah has already come. But He did not come riding on a great white horse. He rode on a humble donkey, and He was crucified on a cross between two thieves." You can imagine how the Jews of that time responded. "How could the Messiah be put to death?" they asked. It is not possible. What foolishness! He is the one who will deliver us. How could His life end upon a shameful cross? For the Jews, the cross definitely was a stumbling block.

The cross was a stumbling block to the Greeks also. St. Paul says the Greeks considered the cross foolishness. The Greeks prized wisdom above all things. The Greeks have produced philosophers—Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates. Greek philosophy has been the example of human wisdom that the world has known. For the Greeks, to find salvation was by understanding all the laws of knowledge. It was the way of wisdom. If you could know how all the laws operate the world, that you could be saved. The audacity of these early preachers to come along and say, "No, it's not how much you know that saves you—you need know only one thing, and that is Jesus Christ died for your sins." You can imagine the response of those learned Greeks. "That's too simple. It's got to be more complicated than that." Thus, many of the Greeks called the Gospel foolishness.

Yes, we can understand the frustration of the early Christians as they proclaim the good news. It is almost too good to be true. On that tree two thousand years ago, man was reconciled to God. There are many people today to whom that would be foolishness. There are many today who believe the cross of Jesus Christ has no relevance to the world

in which we live. Yet Paul says, for those who are called, to those who have given themselves to Christ, to those who have experienced His risen presence in their lives, the cross is the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

Let's consider the wisdom of God for a moment. We human creatures have such an exaggerated appreciation of our own intellect, and reason. We think reality must conform to our particular world view.

So it is with the cross. Anybody who tries to explain away the cross of Jesus Christ and its meaning for the lives of men and women is simply wasting his time. There is a reality that cannot be tested in the laboratory—except in the laboratory of human living day by day. Christ, the wisdom of God and the power of God.

If you and I only realized how much power Christ offers us for living of our lives. You can understand why people in the days of the early church could not perceive that power. It seemed foolishness to them that the cross was the most powerful symbol in the world. After all, it was such a little group of Christians—housewives, farmers, fishermen and tax-collectors—who were telling the story. They were not a very powerful group.

If you and I had been God two thousand years ago, we wouldn't have done it that way. We wouldn't have had the Babe of Bethlehem born to Mary and Joseph in a lowly stable. We would not have started out with Simon Peter, or Matthew, or James and John—with Judas, or Barnabas, or Paul. We would have started out with Caesar. We would have had our son born in the royal household. We would have started with the heads of government, and let the faith "trickle down." But God never works that way; He always works from the bottom up.

There is no clearer demonstration of the power of the cross than what happened two thousand years ago in the life of the early church. That motley group of people who were laughed at, rejected, and persecuted, in a very short time, took over the whole Roman empire. The mighty empire that had oppressed them was soon to be known as the Holy Roman Empire, guardian of the Christian faith. At the time, Paul was preaching, however, it must have sounded like a lot of foolishness that the cross was the very power of God. If we in the church only knew that today.

The cross is no crutch, as some would have us believe. It is the most powerful symbol in this world.

Bishop Gerald Kennedy used to tell a story about an Irish missionary who went to Switzerland. One day as he preached to the people, he told them that martyrs were the best intercessors for men at the throne of God. They were a literal people, so they killed him that he might be the intercessor. But the wonderful thing about the story is that it

worked. They became Christians. To say “Christ died for you,” never loses its power. It is the very power of God.

Let’s use an unusual analogy. Over a hundred years ago, a fellow named Rutherford Platt, a Massachusetts farmer, became interested in the growing power of expanding squashes. That is, as a squash grows, how much power does it exert? You have seen grass break through an asphalt driveway. Well, what about a squash, or an apple, or a melon, as it expands? How much power is contained in that fruit or that vegetable? So, Rutherford Platt harnessed a squash to a weight lifting device, which had a dial like a grocer’s scale, to indicate the pressure exerted by the expanding fruit. As the days passed, he kept piling on counter balancing weights. He could hardly believe his eyes when he saw vegetables exerting a lifting force of five thousand pounds per square inch. That’s the power of a squash—five thousand pounds of pressure per square inch. When nobody believed him, he set up an exhibit of harvest squash and invited the public to come and see.

There is a lesson in his experiment for us. Jesus would point to the lilies of the field, and the birds of the air, and say, “Are you not of much more value than they?” Thus, we might point to that squash exerting five thousand pounds of pressure, and say to ourselves, “Are we not more than a squash?” How much power there would be to our lives, if they were properly channeled—if they were in harmony with God’s purpose and plan. How much power our lives might exert for our own good, our family’s good, and our world’s good.

An old gospel song goes like this: “There is power, power, wonder-working power, in the precious blood of the Lamb.” There is power—power for your life, and mine. There is enough power to run this world upside down. There’s enough power to turn our lives around.

“For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God, and the wisdom of God.”

AMEN