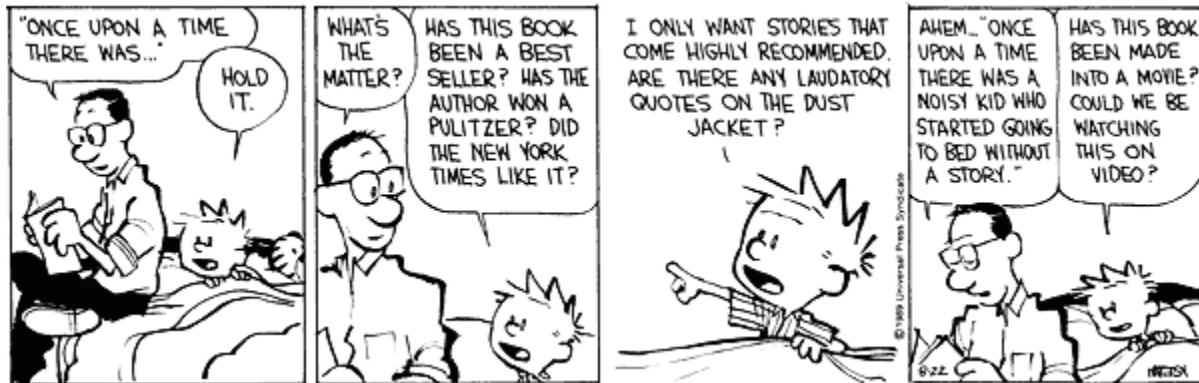


Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah
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“Foolishness”

Micah 6.1-8, 1 Corinthians 1.18-31, Matthew 5.1-12



Calvin demonstrates some very striking and endearing foolishness. This morning I want to spend some time talking with you about that topic: foolishness.

First a little background on the first Corinthian letter. The apostle Paul writes this letter to a church experiencing some conflict, and in answer to some questions they had posed to him. One of the conflicts tearing the fabric of this church in the Roman town of Corinth is allegiance to different leaders. Some of them apparently follow a man named Apollos, and some have chosen to follow Peter, and some lift up Paul himself as their leader, while others (a little more on the right track) claim to follow Christ. It was somewhat characteristic of Roman culture, based as it was in large part on Greek ideals and culture, to encourage its citizens to identify with one or another noteworthy figure. It was the way Greek and Roman citizens asserted their identity and even their superiority over others.

And wisdom was prized above perhaps anything else. Socrates wrote in one of his works: "No one who has not been a philosopher and who is not wholly pure when he departs is allowed to enter into the communion of the gods, but only the lover of knowledge"¹ We are all aware that wisdom and learning were highly esteemed and valued by both the Greeks and the Romans.

¹ Plato, Phaedo [4] 60, [32] 82).

Beyond that, there is evidence to suggest that the Corinthians were struggling valiantly to overcome a strong sense of civic unworthiness. Their city had been destroyed and then rebuilt by the Romans, and was therefore a young city by Roman standards. Furthermore it was a seaport city, and saw Roman soldiers passing through continuously. Thus it had the reputation of being immoral and corrupt. The Corinthians had a reputation to dismantle. So it would be natural for them to embrace strength and wisdom and learning, the values of their culture.

Paul attempts in multiple ways to disassemble this kind of thinking and posturing. In fact, Paul writes to his Corinthian friends, rather than embracing wisdom and strength, they should be looking to the apparent foolishness and weakness of the cross.

And it was foolish and weak. It was a humiliating and agonizing form of execution. The non-Jews among the Corinthians would be repulsed by crucifixions because of their horror, because of the kinds of people who were executed in that way, because of their wretched humiliation. Jews, for their part, would be disgusted by the practice, among other reasons, because it is stated in Deuteronomy chapter 21 that anyone who is hung on a tree is cursed.

Frankly, the Corinthians would probably be very happy to forget that the crucifixion ever occurred and instead spend their time arguing about which one of their self-selected leaders was the greatest.

Paul will not let them get away with that. He paraphrases a passage from Isaiah chapter 29, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” So the Jews are demanding signs and the Gentiles seek wisdom, but, writes Paul, “we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” Indeed.

We have the same squeamishness about the cross today. We have rendered it a much less offensive symbol than it was for first century subjects of the Roman Empire. But it is still the cross. We still follow a crucified Messiah, a man who died in weakness and humiliation and powerlessness on this tree. Paul tells us that we should do so proudly. “To those who are called, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength...God

chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.”

When the great French scientist Pierre-Simon Laplace presented his view of the mechanics of the solar system to the Prussian emperor, he was supposedly asked where God was in that process. He responded, "Sir, I have no need of that hypothesis."

Do you find yourself agreeing with Laplace more often than not? One popular personality profile has pegged me very accurately as a “Learner.” I relish the opportunity to read and to learn, to wrestle with new ideas and new analytical techniques. Witness a bachelor’s degree and three more after that. The very concept of lifting up foolishness as a virtue makes me more than a little queasy. But here it is. Even “Learners” like me are called to acknowledge the profound reversal that Paul is describing in this passage.

God chooses things that are low and despised, “so that no one may boast in the presence of God...God is the source of our life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.’” That’s from Jeremiah chapter 9.

So we are not to boast in our allegiance to a particular leader. We are not to boast in our adherence to a particular political creed or party. We are not to boast in what we own or where we live. We are not to boast in our achievements. We are not to boast in our lineage or family. We are not to boast about the nation we call home. We are not to boast about the particular Christian denomination to which we belong. We are not to boast about our learning or so-called wisdom. We are not to boast about our God-given gifts and abilities, as if some were more desirable than others.

We are to boast in one and only one thing, that we follow Christ crucified, a stumbling block and foolishness to those who are perishing, but for those who are called, the power and the wisdom of God. You and I are to live as followers of a Messiah who suffered and died, and we are to embrace the cross as his calling for us.

The beatitudes are filled with this same foolishness. The poor in spirit, those who are mourning, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted...how can these be blessed? Shouldn't it rather read “Blessed are the proud, the joyful, the powerful, the achievers, the mighty, the devious, the warriors, and those who exercise authority?” That would make a lot more sense, because that seems to be the way our world is constructed. But no, just the opposite.

The beatitudes are a statement of what life is like in the kingdom of heaven. They are a description of what that kingdom is like, and the way in which they are stated implies very clearly that the kingdom is present already here on earth. Furthermore, they are not an exhortation to a particular way of living, but they are rather a statement of fact. We do not read, “Be poor in spirit, for then you will have the kingdom of heaven.” No. “We read a statement of “the way things are” in the kingdom: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” It is theirs right now.

Foolishness, to those who are perishing. But to those who are called, the power and wisdom of God.

Micah writes about the same sort of foolishness.

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

What? No fancy car? No stack of money or pile of possessions or impressive home? No accumulation of college degrees? No physical security? No family? No notoriety or success? No endless pursuit of recreation? No. What is good? What does the LORD require of us? Only “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.”

Foolishness, to those who are perishing. But to those who are called, the power and wisdom of God.

In Matthew 11:25 Jesus prays, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the

intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.”

Purposefully giving up our own power and wisdom and maturity is not an easy thing. In fact, it is a process, a life-long process. But we have to begin somewhere and some time. I find it really, really hard to reject my power and wisdom for the weakness and foolishness of the cross. How about you? Well...will you walk that direction with me, anyhow?