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4th Sunday after Epiphany
Sermons
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1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31 - "THE WORD OF THE CROSS"

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! We live in a world of contrasts today. Our society is split into different world views, each with its own core beliefs, values, and ways of discerning truth. Differences in world view account for distrust, ambivalence, incomprehension, and lack of clear communication between people, even when they happen to speak the same language. For instance, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus may all speak English here in America and share the same basic human needs, however there are great difference with respect to the nature and purpose of life, who or what God is, and how God or the gods relate to humans and humans to the God.

Sociologists divide all the worlds cultures of the past and present into two basic kinds of culture or worldview, power cultures and wisdom cultures. Signs and wonders, displays of power, are important and impressive to people from power cultures, while the cultivation of knowledge and enlightened thinking, the mastery of wisdom, captivates people from wisdom cultures. This is not to suggest that power cultures lack wisdom or that wisdom cultures lack power, just that most of the people in a given culture tend to gravitate toward one over the other.

For instance, the Jews of Second Temple Judaism in the days of St. Paul were a power culture; they looked and asked for signs, displays of God's power. The Jewish people were impressed by Jesus in Galilee, because the words He spoke had power. When Jesus spoke things happened, people were healed, demons were cast out, and sins were forgiven. As a result great crowds of people began to follow Jesus wherever He went; most of the people believed Jesus was a prophet of God and some even the long awaited Messiah. But the closer Jesus got to Jerusalem and the cross, the more people began to question Jesus and grow hostile to Him. Jesus' own disciples rebuked the Lord when He told them it was necessary for Him to be rejected, handed over, suffer, die, and rise again and most abandoned Jesus when He was lifted high on the cross. To the Jews the cross a sign of weakness and God's curse, for Deuteronomy 21:22-23 reads, *"And if a man ha committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God."*

On the other hand the Greeks of the ancient world were a wisdom culture; they favored logic, reasoned debate, and public speaking. We may call the Greeks the fathers of philosophy, for they gave us the big three, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle. The Greeks developed all sorts of philosophies for individual citizens, city-states, and all things in the universe, from metaphysics to ethics, the Greeks had a philosophy for it. Acts 17:16-34 recounts St. Paul's encounter with Greek philosophers in the city of

Athens in the Areopagus (hill of Mars). Epicurean (those who sought the pleasurable life) and Stoic (stressed the rational order of nature and urged people to accept their fate) philosophers were present debating city governance. Paul preached Christ Jesus crucified and risen to them, but most of them mocked him. The concept of bodily resurrection seemed irrational to them, because their worldview taught them to look forward to death as the release of the spirit from the prison of the body. And here was someone telling them that one crucified as a criminal was raised from the dead, what laughable foolishness. The Greeks looked and thought of Paul's preaching the cross the same way you would look and think of me if I told you in all seriousness and conviction that the moon is made out of cheese.

The Jews and Greeks of Paul's day were of different worldviews, one from a power culture and one from a wisdom culture; there was much that they disagreed upon, but on this they were agreed: the cross and resurrection of Christ Jesus must be rejected, for it is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks. St. Paul writes to a Christian congregation in the city of Corinth made mostly of Greeks (or Gentiles) and some Jews:

18 For the word of the cross is foolish to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written: 'I shall destroy the wisdom of the wise and the learning of the learned.' 20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom, God is well-pleased through the foolishness of preaching to save those who believe: 22 since also Jews ask for signs and Greeks seek wisdom, 23 but we are preaching Christ crucified, to Jews a scandal, but to Gentiles foolishness, 24 but to the called, to Jews and also to Gentiles, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God: 25 because the foolish things of God are wiser than men and the weak things of God are stronger than men. 26 For look at your calling, brothers, that not many are wise according to the flesh, not many are powerful, not many are well-born: 27 rather the foolish things of the world God elected, in order that He might shame the wise, and the weak things of the world God elected, in order that He might shame the strong, 28 and the common of the world and the despised God elected, the things not being, 29 in order that not any flesh may boast before God. 30 But from Him you are in Christ Jesus, who has become wisdom for us from God, and righteousness and also holiness and redemption, 31 in order that just as it is written: 'The one who boasts, let him boast in the Lord.'

St. Paul here presents the Christian worldview, chosen by God in Christ Jesus, and identifies how it contrasts to the other views of the world. God purposefully has chosen things that are a stumbling block and foolishness to people in the world so that He might be glorified in Christ and no person may boast in his own achievements. God chose the foolishness of preaching the cross to convey His saving grace in Christ to people, as the means by which the Holy Spirit gives and works faith. God chose ordinary water used to drink and clean combined with the Word in Baptism to wash away people's sins and adopted them as His children. God chose common bread and wine to be the Body and Blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. God chose the cross, a punishment due guilty criminals, as the place of death for His holy Son, so that by Jesus' death we might live.

God chose you in Christ! Though you are not strong, nor wise, nor noble born according to the thinking of the world. God chose you in Christ, though you are sinful, rebellious, and weak. God chose you in Christ because you cannot not choose Him. God chose you in Christ that He might be glorified. There is no room for you or I to

boast in ourselves; we cannot glory in our work, efforts, or achievements before God. God has you and me in Christ; He has called us by the Gospel and we believe the message proclaimed, that Christ Jesus crucified and risen is our wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and redemption before God.

If we are Christians, if we are to remain Christians, then the truth that we must cling to by faith, what we must value more than anything else in the world is the proclamation of the cross of Christ in preaching, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, for Christ crucified and risen is the wisdom and power of God to those who are being saved. The cross of the risen Christ Jesus defines, shapes, molds, and forms all called to be Christians and all that is Christian. Christianity is not centered or defined in morality, ethics, philosophy or dazzling signs and wonders, but in Christ Jesus and the preaching of His cross! This is indeed a stumbling block and foolishness to all unbelievers in the world today; this is indeed a great reversal in the worldview of men.

The Beatitudes, which Jesus spoke to His disciples, are centered in Christ and His cross; they too turn the worldview of men upside down:

3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. **4** “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. **5** “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. **6** “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. **7** “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. **8** “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. **9** “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. **10** “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. **11** “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. **12** Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:3-11).

The cross of Christ turned it all around. Jesus became cursed of God on the cross that we might be forgiven. Jesus was raised from the dead that we too might rise to from the dead. This is a stumbling block, this is foolishness to the unbelieving world, but to us who believe Christ Jesus crucified and risen is the wisdom and power of God! Therefore let us boast in Lord and lift high the cross of Jesus Christ, Amen!