

Reverend Kenneth Sauer writes: “I will never forget that day. I was only eleven years old. The director of our Youth Choir had no training in preaching. His words were not polished. But I will never forget them. He was asked to deliver the sermon one Sunday morning, so he simply told the story of Christ crucified. He described the Lord arrested, tried, condemned, beaten, mocked, whipped, stripped...hands and feet nailed to the cross, side pierced, and Jesus’ final cry from the cross, “*It is finished.*” Sauer says, “On that day, when the Youth Choir Director spoke, it was not his eloquence that touched me deeply. Nor was it my own ability to comprehend. No, it was the unseen power of the cross that this old, but always new, story releases wherever and whenever it is told.”

That same power has touched many lives, including my own. **Christ crucified is the heart of our faith.** When that simple yet profound *message* is proclaimed, it releases a power that changes people in ways that the most erudite and learned philosophers of this world cannot understand! In our Scripture this morning, Paul speaks about wisdom—true wisdom! **True wisdom is not how we think, but how God thinks, how God acts in the world through Christ.** For many people in the world who remain unconvinced and unconverted, this message sounds like foolishness. But to those of us who have heard, believed, and experienced it, “*the message of the cross*” is the power of God! **Through it we share a common humanity and a common calling!**

Just look at what happens in the lives of people when this message is preached and taught. Murderers become martyrs...fighters become lovers...hate-mongers become peacemakers...addicts become evangelists...gang members become church members...and the list could go on and on! The very power of God is let loose in the lives of those of us who are being saved by the message of the cross! As Christians, we are bound together by “*the message of the cross.*”

After Jesus uses the analogy of a camel going through the eye of a needle to show the odds of a rich person entering the kingdom of God, his disciples raise their voices in protest: “*Then who can be saved?*” To this Jesus responds: “*With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.*” **Our hope never resides in our own efforts, but in the unimaginably foolish love of God.** But it is only foolishness when it is seen from the perspective of this world. If we ask the world for the answers to our questions, we are doomed with the world’s answers; but when we ask God for answers, we obtain ultimate wisdom!

At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, after his baptism, he immediately went into the wilderness where he was tempted. The basic temptations were power, prestige and possessions. He wrestled with these for forty days until Satan left him. When we are in the wilderness, we too reach the depth of the gospel’s foolishness. In today’s society power, prestige and possessions are the basic promises that are advertised as the rewards for living by society’s values. But these things are foolishness to God, and they are foolishness to those of us being changed by the power of the cross.

There is no way to escape the very serious nature of Christian faith. Either it is a stumbling block to people, or conversely, the values of society are foolishness to a serious Christian person. It cannot be both ways. Dr. Luke Timothy Johnson writes: “For our present age, in which the ‘wisdom of the world’ is expressed in individualism, narcissism, a preoccupation with private rights, and competition, the *‘wisdom of the cross’* is the most profoundly countercultural message of all!”

It takes courage to trust in the wisdom of the cross because it means we are going to be radically different than the world around us. The crucifixion of Jesus began long before he was born. It began in eternity with a decision in the heart of God to journey from heaven’s glory to poverty...from power to vulnerability...from awesomeness to nothingness. The God of the universe made a conscious decision to be born as a human baby in this finite world!

This was the first step to Calvary. It's what theologians call the self-emptying of God. "*The message of the cross*" begins with God's willing release of privilege and power—two of the basic values that our society places such a high price tag on. In Jesus' day the political powers were threatened by the wisdom of God at work in Jesus. They held on to another kind of wisdom—we can call it "worldly wisdom" about what is true. It was built on brute force and control which is still the mindset of the world! The world cannot understand "wisdom" based on love and grace. How foolish and weak it sounds to *turn the other cheek* in the face of an adversary's threats. How foolish and weak it sounds to speak of *loving your enemies*. What kind of craziness is it to *forgive others seventy times seven*? How silly it is to want to *see yourself as a servant* rather than the one being served. **No matter, God's people share a common humanity and a common calling.**

This is not the way of the world, but it is the way of Christ. When Jesus took our sins upon the cross, he took it upon himself to let go of his privilege, power and prestige to "identify" with us sinners who deserve death. Identification is becoming one with others. It may involve risking our own identity by sharing the identity of another. When the Nazis invaded Denmark in the Second World War, notices quickly went up in Copenhagen, ordering all Jews to sew big yellow Stars of David to their clothes so that everybody could identify them as Jews—or as a lower form of life. A brave Christian was in the habit of riding his bicycle in the parks of Copenhagen every day. The day after that edict was published, he went for his usual ride but something was different. **Sewn to his tunic for everyone to see was a large yellow Star of David.**

At Bethlehem in Judea, the God and King of the universe put on the badge of our humanity for the world to see, in essence saying from a manger: "I now share your humanity with you." In that great moment of history God was completely "identifying" with us. If we struggle with what "*the message of the cross*" requires of us, maybe we will find that the closer we get to those

who are hurting and those who have been broken by this world, the less painful our own life will be. **A common humanity and a common calling.**

When we begin to identify with the pain of other people it changes things that are important to us. Have you ever noticed that from the very beginning of Jesus ministry to his death on the cross he turned the values of society upside down—or should I say right side up? Let's turn our attention to verses 22 to 24 of our Scripture for a moment: *“Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”*

Using the Corinthian church as a kind of object lesson, Paul illustrates the principle that God takes what is *foolish* to the world and makes it *wise*. The Corinthian church had little or no clout in society. Not that Paul is suggesting that the only people God loves are the only ones to whom the gospel was attractive. Rather, he is illustrating that out of this small congregation God is able to take ordinary people and do extraordinary things through them. **That's because we share a common humanity and a common calling.**

The most powerful force in first-century Corinth was neither the political power of Rome nor the cultural heritage of Greece, **but the gospel of Jesus Christ that called the church together.** Tony Campolo once said that life is like a shop window where somebody has broken in at night and exchanged all the price tags, so the things that are really cheap have been marked as the most expensive; and things that are really valuable are things priced at a huge discount. That's what *“the wisdom of the world”* has done. It turned the value of things upside down. So, to put right that which is most valuable in life, we come to the CROSS, where Jesus let go of everything for the sake of love! We who find it so difficult to let go of the things of this world, stand in awe at this place of dying to self which becomes a place of profound meaning and profound joy. **The CROSS is the place for all of us who share a common humanity and a common calling in Jesus. Amen.**