

July 17, 2011

The National Presbyterian Church

## A Bit of Foolishness

I Corinthians 1:18-31

Rev. Patrick Willson

**H**ave you ever considered what an odd thing a sermon is? I preach and you listen. It's odd: for most people this is quite unlike anything else we do all week. It is even odd for Sunday morning.

I don't know what your Sunday morning routine is, but I get up early, slip an I.V. of coffee in a vein and settle down with the morning papers. I read the news. The news is new.

Were the headlines of *The Washington Post* to announce "Lee Surrenders at Appomattox" we would be baffled. That is old news. We want new news: we want to know how the Nationals did last night. They won in Atlanta 5-2, and I was reading about that eight hours after the last pitch was thrown. That's new news. I read the news, clean up, and come to worship.

In worship we read the Scriptures, these ancient writings. The passage we just heard from First Corinthians is one of the more recent contributions, from the year 55, give or take a year, making it about 1,956 years old; and that is very old news indeed.

Isn't that curious? Have you read anything else this week 20 centuries old? How can that possibly be relevant? How can it be useful? Checking your email for last night's messages is perfectly reasonable, but tell someone you go to church to get messages 20 centuries old and they will wonder about you. It sounds silly, odd, foolish. As a matter of fact, that's what Paul calls it: foolishness.

To measure this foolishness: The National Presbyterian Church is a large enterprise with a large budget, a large staff and an enormous program. Recently we have been adding staff. We could have gone just a few blocks away and hired an MBA from American University. That would be relevant and useful, wouldn't it? George Washington University offers a Masters in Tourism Administration with specialties in Hospitality Management and Event and Meeting Management; with all our meetings and events, wouldn't that be great for keeping the customers happy? George Mason University's Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution awards Ph.D.'s and M.A.'s. Wouldn't that be helpful at The National Presbyterian Church?

This morning we welcome Dr. Quinn Fox as a colleague in ministry. Quinn did his Ph.D. at Vanderbilt and wrote his dissertation on the 19<sup>th</sup> century German theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher. Baseball had its All Star game this week, and I can assure you that Schleiermacher would be on everyone's theological All Star Team; but mention Schleiermacher most places in Washington and people will think you're talking about a German beer!

This is the foolishness we're about here in worship. The foolishness is not ours alone. Foolishness erupts when we read our Scriptures. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians

makes it clear: at the heart of the matter is the cross. That is what we preach and teach and live and serve.

The problem, of course, is the foolishness of the cross. It is embarrassing. When I wrote out the words I said a moment ago, that the cross is “what we preach and teach and live and serve,” I caught myself wondering, “Now how am I going to sell that?” That is the problem. It is unsellable. It is unmanageable. It is unappealing. As information it is practically useless. It is a lot of foolishness, plain and simple, as Paul himself admits: “the cross is foolishness.”

No one wants the cross. People want a better church, a church that provides more services, more activities, more fellowship, more excitement. In all of the hopes regarding the future how many people ask for the cross? One church growth expert says preachers spend too much time worrying about the Scriptures and our theology. “Just say something helpful,” he says. Preach something useful, something relevant.

Paul says that when he came preaching among that Corinthian congregation he “decided to know nothing among us except Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). Is it any wonder that the Corinthian church is in turmoil? Paul’s words highlight the problem because the cross is not useful, or at least not useful to us. The cross does not fit our plans, the cross does not accommodate itself to our agendas, the cross has no form or comeliness that we should desire it. It is irrelevant, useless, foolish.

According to the wisdom of our world it has nothing to offer us. Or perhaps it offers us everything precisely because it is so useless, irrelevant and foolish. Irrelevant news. A lot of foolishness. These news bulletins are announced weekly in worship. They are not phrased

in the common language of our world's wisdom. The world's wisdom cracks open when it tries to come to terms with the cross. Instead of useful, practical knowledge what we find here so strange and different from anything else we hear during the week that we might spend our whole lives trying to come to terms with it and understand it. The wisdom the world provides us counsel on how to spend our lives, how to arrange our lives, how to enjoy our lives; the foolishness of the gospel tells us that our lives are not even ours to own and enjoy, arrange and spend.

People sometimes ask, "What do Presbyterians believe?" One great answer to this question comes from *A Brief Statement of Faith*: "In life and in death we belong to God." That is borrowed from the Heidelberg Catechism, which borrows from the Apostle Paul: "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." In this lesson from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians Paul writes: "God is the source of your life in Christ Jesus." That "In life and in death we belong to God," is well attested in the Scriptures, it is central to our Reformed tradition.

There's just this problem: what can you do with information like that? We read Jesus' teachings with stained glass voices and forget how zany they are. Here's a treasure hidden in a field that someone found and buried again and then sold everything to possess. The treasure is so vast, so compelling that the finder gives up everything, including things like honesty and ethics and observance of laws regarding found property, to purchase the field where treasure is hidden. If that story is not wild and crazy enough for you, then look at the story that follows it: a pearl merchant sells everything to purchase one pearl of incomparable value. That sounds terrific until we start

thinking about it. What happens next? What does this shrewd pearl dealer do now? You've got one pearl but you're out of business! It's crazy, a lot of foolishness.

We are intimately involved in this foolishness because in this foolishness, the foolishness of the cross, we discover who we truly are. This foolishness whispers secrets like: you are a pilgrim in the world on your way to a celestial city whose architect and builder are God. You are not just the lawyer, teacher, merchant, or administrator that this world names you to be; you are a wayfarer and journeyer to God. You are not only the mother, father, son or daughter your family names you to be, you are God's own child anticipating a grand homecoming with celebrations unimaginable. You are God's fabulous secret. John the Elder tells us breathlessly, "What we will be has not yet been revealed" [1 John 3:2]; and the apostle whispers "your life is hidden with Christ in God" [Col 3:3]: and before your story is all over, John the Divine of the book of Revelation says, Christ will give to you "a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows" [Rev 2:17]. A secret name but you will know. You are a secret, which you may not know, but God knows and you will know it, and here in worship we deal in secrets like that.

This foolishness is not useful; it is not practical.

Go over to the SunTrust Bank on Wisconsin Avenue and fill out a mortgage application. On the line that asks for "other outstanding obligations," write in "In life and in death I belong to God." See if you get that loan.

When you interview for a new position and the interviewer asks you what you are looking for, say: "I am searching for a treasure so vast and compelling I would surrender everything, absolutely everything for that

treasure.” Afterwards we can talk about how that interview went.

Go out to Reagan National Airport. When the ticket agent requests your identification and asks you, “Where are you going?” explain: “I am a pilgrim journeying to a celestial city whose architect and builder is God, and who I am has not yet been revealed.” See how long it takes for airport security to appear.

I don’t know what you’re laughing about; you’re paying me to tell you this kind of foolishness.

Why is it that with 60, 80, 120 channels on television we come here in hope of hearing useless information? Gathering in Christian worship is a strange business. We come here yearning after useless information, craving foolishness.

The novelist Walker Percy evoked the oddness of what we are about in his parable of the castaway.<sup>i</sup> “Suppose” you are “a castaway on an island,” says Percy. You wake on a beach with no memory of who you are and no recollection of where you come from. All you know is that you find yourself cast up on a beach. Your island, however, is a pleasant place, with “a remarkable culture with highly developed social institutions, a good university, first class science, a flourishing industry and art.” The natives receive you hospitably, and you make the best of the situation, get a job, make a living, raise a family, and you become, as the phrase goes, “a useful member of the community.” You study and learn local customs. To make your way on the island you give your attention to the knowledge and news of the island. “Island news” is news relevant to your survival and prosperity, the knowledge relevant to life as a member of the society; and you need such news to make a happy, satisfying home on the island.

Even so, you do not feel at home. In spite of all you learn and all you know, “something is missing.” You might say that you feel homesick, except you have invested yourself in fashioning your home on the island, but island news and useful island knowledge cannot erase your remembering always that you are a castaway and a stranger, “who despite a lifetime of striving to be at home on the island is as homeless now” as the first day you were cast up on the beach.

So on your days off you go down to the shore and become a beachcomber, looking, searching, looking for what? You look for a message in a bottle, for news from across the sea. You do not ignore useful island news, but you walk the beaches nonetheless looking for something more, something else. You look for a message in a bottle, for news that is not simply island news, but a word to hint who you truly are and where you come from and where you are going and the meaning of this journey we call life.

We Presbyterians are the proper sort of people who do their beachcombing in services of Christian worship gathered around pulpit, table and font. Filled with the wisdom the world gives us we gather to bathe in the foolishness of God.

We have heard all manner of relevant information from *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* and NPR; from marketing surveys and Gallup polls; from Dr. Phil and Oprah and Emeril Lagasse. We come here yearning for the blessed irrelevance of news from across a vast, unnamable sea. We crave the useless information that before it is done with us might just make us useful to God and our neighbor. We hunger for the foolishness of God to save us from all the weary and wearying wisdoms we know so well.

The cross of Christ is that foolishness, a stumbling block to some and foolishness to others, but the power of God nonetheless. Were you expecting me to explain the cross? It cannot be explained. Were you expecting me to make this sound reasonable, logical? It cannot be done. As Paul says, “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength”

When Serge Diaghilev learned that his collaborator Jean Cocteau was working on a new play, he wrote him, “Astonish me! I wait for you to astonish me!” We gather in hope of being astonished by news from across the sea, telling who we are and whose we are and how we may finally find our way home. We come here to be astonished by the word of the cross that outshines all our other wisdom and knowledge. We come to be astonished by the foolishness of God wiser by far than our useful human wisdom. We come to be astonished by tales of treasure and precious pearls; to be astonished with dreams of glorious cities and joyful homecomings; to be astonished by the winsome secrets that are the high and holy foolishness of the gospel.

The Apostle Paul assures us that it is by no means foolish but the nothing less than the wisdom of God that we should embrace the high, holy and glorious foolishness of the cross of Christ. May God bless us with exactly that foolishness!

**THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, DC 20016  
[www.NationalPres.org](http://www.NationalPres.org) 202.537.0800

---

<sup>i</sup> Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), p. 119, 142-144.