

Sermon: Signs and Wisdom

March 3, 2024

Exodus 20:1-17

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Let me admit, right up front, that the Apostle Paul and I are not on the same wavelength today. Almost two thousand years ago, in the mid-50s of the first century, Paul was concerned about things he'd heard about the Corinthian church.

"It has been made clear to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you," he wrote.

Watch out for Chloe. She's got people.

As Douglas A. Campbell writes in *The Christian Century*, "The church at Corinth was a mess. I count 15 distinguishable problems that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians..." Dr. Campbell, by the way, went on to list them, which I'm not. He offers this summary, however: "Underlying this mess, there were four main difficulties: a basic failure in relating to one another in love; a dramatic failure of the local church leaders to act considerately in the face of their competition for status and influence; arrogant theological reasoning that denied the importance of the body (which we might call 'Christian intellectualism'); and tensions arising from the pressures that Paul's teaching about sex placed on his converts. Each of these problems would have been bad enough, but when they were all present together, the combination was toxic."

In the first chapter, Paul took on the divisions Chloe had reported in the Corinthian church, people identifying with the opinions and commitments of different apostles, including Apollos, Simon Peter, and Paul himself. "Was Paul crucified for you?" he wrote testily.

To counteract the divisiveness Paul raised the basic scandal of the Christian faith: a crucified Messiah. In Judaism, a Messiah who fails to free the people from the domination of outside nations is, by definition, not a Messiah. Among the Greek-influenced people of the Eastern Mediterranean, among the Greeks of Corinth, a crucified leader is simply a rebel, and a failed rebel at that. A crucified Christ is ludicrous.

Adam Hearlson writes at Working Preacher, "Near the palatine hill in Rome, there is this remarkable piece of graffiti scrawled into the wall of the dormitory of imperial pageboys. In the depiction, which any Google search will unearth, a Christian boy is mocked for worshipping a crucified man with a donkey's head. The boy, standing in front of the cross, raises his hand in adoration of this donkey God. Scrawled below the picture are the words: 'Alexemenos worships his God.'"

You are together in this foolish faith, wrote Paul. You're up against a world that sees you as fantastically deluded. Dividing against yourselves is ludicrous.

If you're thinking that's a pretty good argument but maybe not quite enough, Paul continued on for three more chapters.

But I'm not on that wavelength. In verse 22, Paul wrote, "For Jews ask for signs and Greeks desire wisdom." That's something of a stereotypic statement, and like most stereotypes it has some truth to it and some falsehood. Certainly Greek culture was well known for its philosophy and commitment to reason. It was, after all, the society that had molded Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, and so many others. Early Christians embedded Greek philosophical ideas into their writings, notably Gospel writer, John.

"Jews ask for signs." Did they? The Hebrew Bible is full of the mighty acts of God, and much of the rest of those ancient Scriptures refer to mighty acts of God to explain the obligations of human beings to God. For the early Jewish Christians, Jesus' own resurrection was a great big brightly lit sign of God's favor. For the early Christians, signs of the Holy Spirit's presence defined a church doing God's will.

In our twenty-first century setting, I think relatively few people look for signs or wisdom to be a support, a buttress, that keeps faith from collapsing. We have a marked ability to discount potential signs. Is there a natural explanation for this, we ask, and if there is, it isn't a sign.

As for wisdom, well. We do not live in a time that values wisdom. Contemporary people tend to want to know what they *can* do. What are the limits to our power, and if there are limits, can we push them farther? As the opening to the *Six Million Dollar Man* went decades ago: "Better. Stronger. Faster."

As we found with weaponry, as we found with transferring carbon into the atmosphere, as we may be finding with artificial intelligence, we do things and only later do we start to wonder, "Was this a good idea?"

That's... not wise.

If it's not signs and it's not wisdom, though, what is buttressing our faith? There are Christian preachers out there who will tell you that visible accumulation of wealth shows the presence of God. I think they're wrong. In fact, I think they're lying. But if you're looking for something to support your faith and you'd like it to be riches, there are people who'll cheer you on.

There are a bunch of people who will tell you that it's power. The Church, they say, must be in charge. These people have been around for centuries, first succeeding in making Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380 CE through the Emperor Theodosius, and failing to recognize the folly of this project from then until now.

I'll tell you that for me it's the support I find in my soul when things get really bad: when I'm deeply sad or emotionally fragile or lost for the next part of my journey. To be honest, I don't recommend relying on that as your buttress of faith. I may receive a lot of strength in pain, but it's still painful.

For many Christians over the centuries, it's been study of the Scriptures that has sustained their faith, and if that what it is for you, push it a little further. Go a little deeper. For many Christians over the centuries, it's been prayer. Some desire nothing more than time and silence. Others find it helpful to have words to follow, which is why we have a Lenten devotional. Some need to be along. Some treasure the company of others.

I'd encourage you as well, when your faith seems the most fragile, to remember that God called you. That wasn't an accident. As Carla Works writes at Working Preacher, "God, in God's wisdom, chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise. To Paul, that does not just mean the cross. God continues to display God's power by choosing even the weak and lowly to be part of God's church." Weak and lowly us to shame the confident and powerful of the world.

I hope that at least one of your supports is what we do today to close our worship: nourish ourselves at the table of Jesus. It's a sacrament. We believe that God has promised to be there when we gather to do this, and we believe that God fulfills these promises. So come to the table in a few minutes. Come to be nourished. Come to be filled.

Come to experience the signs and wisdom that support your soul.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson