

Title: Foolish Grace

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, we give you thanks for your son who taught us how to live and gave us the means of salvation, for we do not often understand your ways, yet your love is still unending; help us be fools for Christ at the foot of his cross, so that we may live forever, in Christ Jesus through whom we live and pray. Amen.

Elie Wiesel was a survivor of the dreaded Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz. He wrote of his experiences in the book *The Night*.

In that book he relates the harrowing story of two Jewish men and a Jewish boy hanged alongside one another. Having mounted the stairs the two adults cried, “long live liberty,” but the boy was silent.

Behind Wiesel someone desperately asked “Where is God?” (Where is He?) The chairs the victims were standing on were kicked out from under them and the three hung there. The adults died quickly, but the boy’s weight wasn’t great enough to snap his neck immediately. For more than half an hour he hung there, dying in slow agony before their eyes.

Again, Wiesel heard the question “Where is God now?” And standing there Wiesel heard a voice within himself answer: “Where is (God) he? Here (God) he is. (God) He is hanging here on this gallows.”

When Wiesel said it was God hanging on the gallows he indicated the death of his faith. Faith in God died with that hanging child. But there is another interpretation, that God suffers with those who suffer, seen most visibly in the death of Christ hanging on his own gallows, the cross.

The cross is the key symbol of Christians. In fact, we are so successful with that symbol that it has faded in the background of an increasingly secular United States. There is a story of a woman shopping for a necklace in a Denver store. The clerk asked her if the woman needed any help. The woman replied, “I want a cross with the little man on it.”

In the Roman world, there were thousands upon thousands of men, big and little, on crosses. They were all killed. The cross was anything but trivial.

Jesus' crucifixion was a scandal. Apparently, it was contentious even in Christian communities. In the hotbed of conflict, Corinth, Paul addressed the cross along with many other conflicts in the Corinthian church.

Many scholars believe what we have with First Corinthians is several of Paul's letters to them combined into one. Our reading is after Paul's greetings and how Paul addresses the main reason for the letter.

If it wasn't for conflict in the early church, there would be no New Testament because most of the New Testament addresses some disagreement or another. The conflicts in the church in Corinth were bigger and more diversified than in any other place. If Rodney King were living in Corinth, he would say, "Why can't we all just get along?"

The first controversy that Paul addresses is that the Corinthians seem to be arguing over who had the best baptism and apparently some baptisms were deemed unofficial. Paul says, "I thank God that I baptized none of you," then he seems to recall a few that he did baptize. (1 Corinthians 1:14a) It appears that Paul was dictating the letter.

Then Paul says that baptism is not his mission. Rather, it is to proclaim the gospel. In fact, Paul claims that he is not even eloquent, because he doesn't want the power of the cross to be limited. (Paul does think highly of himself, even in his humility.)

So, we pick up with Paul talking about the cross. Jesus' crucifixion was something that Christians could not deny, because it did happen and there were hundreds of witnesses. The cross was one of several criticisms of early Christianity. Crucifixion was the ultimate punishment for enemies of the state. Romans had many ways of killing people. Crucifixion was reserved for the worst. Christians were questioned as to why they would follow a criminal.

Shockingly, when I worked in Utah, I worked with Mormons. There was one guy, in particular, who was memorable. He was never shy about expounding Mormon doctrine. That is one of the costs of living in Utah. Mormons don't

wear crosses. You will never find a cross in a Mormon church. Somehow the issue of wearing crosses came up. His comment was, "It's an instrument of death." This was the same attitude of Christianity's critics.

Jesus' crucifixion must have been an issue for the Corinthians, otherwise Paul would not have addressed it. Paul needs to ease the minds of the Corinthians of the importance of the cross to the Christian faith.

Paul meets the issue head on. Paul divides people into two camps. In camp one are the dead. In camp two are the saved. The cross is foolish to the dead. The cross is the power of God to the saved. Now the Corinthians reading this letter would probably prefer to be among the saved rather than the dead. In other words, Paul is skewing the results. He is forcing the Corinthians into his theology.

Paul reinforces his argument with a quote from Isaiah (29:14b). "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." The Greeks and others in Corinth may not concern themselves with Jewish scripture. Yet Paul uses Isaiah for support nonetheless.

Paul seems to concede the critics point. The cross is foolish. Human wisdom is fleeting. If we think we are wise, God will knock us down. In the big scheme of things, everything we think we know is diddly squat. Our knowledge is baby's knowledge compared to God.

Paul takes to mocking. Paul calls out the wise, the scribe, and the debater. Paul asks if God has not made foolish the wisdom of the world.

We don't come to know God through wisdom. Wisdom is inadequate to know God. Instead, God uses foolishness to save people. Wisdom is not the path to salvation. Thank God! I feel relieved. We are saved through faith.

Paul separates Christians from Jews and gentiles, whom Paul calls Greeks. That makes sense since Corinth is in Greece.

How do we know what is true? Jews need a sign from God. For Jews those signs already came – the law through Moses, reinforced by the prophets. Moses was not able to persuade. Moses gave signs. The Greeks found wisdom through philosophy. However, there were several philosophical

schools in Greece. So, there was no philosophical consensus. Without a consensus, Greek philosophy is not wise.

God's wisdom is only made available through Christ. The crucified Christ is stumbling block for Jews and foolishness to gentiles. The Greek word for stumbling block is *skandolon*, a cause for sin. But Paul offers good news and the good news is a paradox. The wisdom of God is available to Jews and gentiles. This is good news! Because everyone is either a Jew or a gentile.

God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Paul's statement reinforces my view of God. It is popular to say that God is omniscient and omnipotent. It is easy to see God this way. I do not think God is omniscient and omnipotent. Compared to our power and wisdom, God appears omniscient and omnipotent. Our brains are too small to understand God.

There may be those who see the cross as nonsense. Those people's brains are too small. God used the cross as the means of salvation. God used the cross to bring humanity in communion with God. The cross is not an instrument of death. The cross is the instrument of life.

Text: **1 Corinthians 1:18–25** (NRSV)

¹⁸ For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³ but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. ¹

¹ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version](#). (1989). (1 Co 1:18–25). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.#