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Sermon 7 March 2021 SOURCE

Title: Foolishness, Faith, and Fellowship

- Good morning, church—we are so glad to be with you this morning and we appreciate so much your taking the time and making the effort to join us today. Now we have just completed a 4-week sermon series called “A Generous Life—the Beauty in Giving” and we had a wonderful Second Helping Bible study to review that series last Sunday evening—thank you to all who attended—we had a great time of discussion and fellowship—I believe that it was one of the best “Second Helpings” that we’ve had so far—and I hope you do too if you were a part of it
- Now as you are no doubt aware, we are in the season of Lent, that season of reflection and self-denial that takes us up into Holy Week and to Easter, and during this time we will be drawing from the lectionary—the revised common lectionary—you can find that at the website on the screen if you’re interested—and each of our sermons over these weeks will draw from one or more the week’s readings for each Sunday—and just as during Advent we focused on thinking about and learning about Jesus’ arrival into history and the events and scriptures surrounding his birth, during these next few Sundays in Lent we will be focusing on, and thinking about, and learning about, Jesus’ life and death and resurrection.
- Because that’s really what Lent is all about—it’s a time to really reflect upon, to meditate upon, what it means for each of us, and for the Church, and for all of creation, that the Son of God, the Messiah, the Living Word, God incarnate, lived and died—and not only that he lived and died, but that he lived and died in the form of

one specific person, Jesus of Nazareth, in a specific place and at a specific time—that his life was real, that he ate and drank and worked and laughed and cried and interacted with other people, and that his life led him to death by crucifixion at the hands of the authorities, a death that was gruesome and painful and humiliating, that he was tortured and mutilated and died—that he was truly dead and that his broken lifeless body was placed in a tomb and those who knew him mourned his loss and wondered what they would do without him.

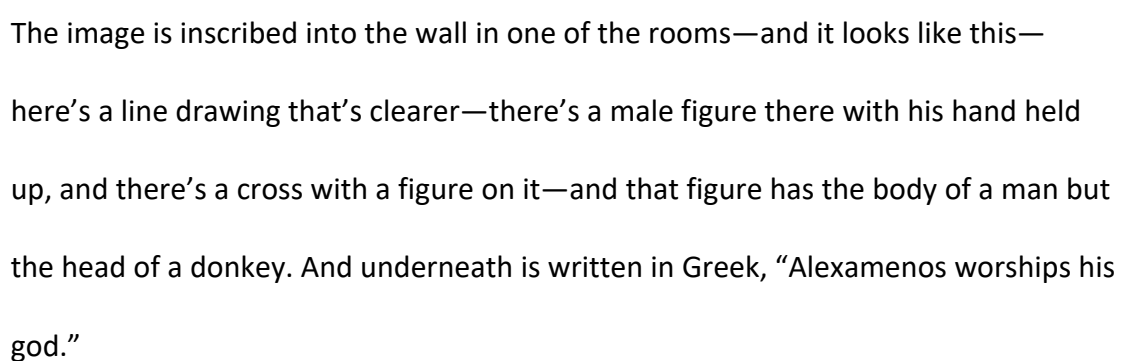
- And that is the story that Lent is about—but even as we consider that story, even as we walk the path of sacrifice and suffering and mortality, we know that death is not the end of the story. We know that Easter is ahead. As Tony Campolo says, we know that Sunday's comin'. And we will celebrate when it does.
- But for a little while during Lent, we take the time to do the hard work of meditating on the mystery of the incarnation—we take time to walk the road that leads to the cross. And that can be a challenging road to walk.
- And so we begin this morning with a challenging passage of Scripture. It was challenging I have no doubt for the audience that Paul addressed it to, the church at Corinth, and it is still challenging for the church today. It is a passage of scripture that many of us almost instinctively resist just a little bit, a passage that some folks want to water down, want to sort of soften, because it speaks to us about the seemingly paradoxical nature of the incarnation—and it makes powerfully clear that there is a difference in the way human nature understands certain things—like power, and logic, and wisdom and strength and value—there is a difference between the way human nature views these things and the way that God views them—which is the way that they really are, when you get right down to it.

- And today we are going to consider three aspects of this passage of scripture that Pastor Tasha read for us—we're going to look at it through 3 lenses, or in terms of three themes that we can talk about—and I believe that God has a message for us this morning—and a challenge for each of us and for the church to be reminded that God's ways are not the world's ways, and that God's standards are not the world's standards.
- And these 3 themes that we are going to work our way through today are: first, Foolishness, second, Faith, and finally, Fellowship.
- Now we're going to begin with "foolishness." And I want to first remind you of a word that you probably already know in English, and that word is "sophomore." In the US, a "sophomore" is a person who is in their second year of school—either college or high school—you're a "freshman" the first year, then a "sophomore," then a "junior" and then in your final year you are a "senior."
- And I want to remind you of this word because the literal meaning of the word "sophomore," if you break it down into the two parts that make it up, is "wise fool." I remember when I was in my second year of college, people, especially juniors and seniors, liked to remind me of this fact. And "sophomore" literally means "wise fool" because it is made up of two Greek words—the first—"Sophia," means wisdom, and a form of that word, "Sophos," means wise. You also see this Greek word in the English word "philosophy" which is literally "the love of wisdom" because you'll remember the Greek "philia" means "love,"
- So "Sophia" and forms of "Sophia" like Sophos and sophon mean wisdom or wise or a wise person

- And the second part of the word “sophomore”—the “more” part, comes from a Greek word that means “foolish.” And that word is *moria*. Its forms, meaning foolishness and a fool, include words like *moros* and *moron*—another English word you are likely familiar with—*moron*—a foolish person—because “*moria*” is Greek for foolishness.
- SO, “*Sophia*” and “*moria*”—sounds like two Italian sisters—these are the Greek for wisdom and foolishness, and they are all over these 8 verses that Pastor Tasha read to us. Forms of the word *Sophia* occur 10 times and forms of *moria* occur 5 times in these verses, and EITHER *Sophia* or *moria* occur at least once in every single one of these 9 verses. (pink and green in image)
- So you could say that just based on sheer quantity, the contrasting ideas of wisdom and foolishness are pretty important in this passage.
- But what is Paul talking about here when he talks about foolishness and wisdom?
- He tells us clearly in verse 18—For the message of the cross is FOOLISHNESS—*moria*—to those who are perishing—to those who do not believe, the gospel that Paul preaches, Christ crucified, is foolishness—it is moronic—but to those who believe it is the very POWER—the strength—of God.
- Paul tells us that the idea that Jesus of Nazareth, Nazareth of all places, that dumpy nowhere town, this peasant carpenter’s son, who winds up on a cross—is the Messiah, is the King of Kings, the Lord and Saviour of the World—well that’s ridiculous to those who consider themselves to be wise—it defies logic—it is contrary to their idea of what it is to be powerful--the idea of dying on a cross is certainly the opposite of what it means to be a god, particularly a Greek god

- Particularly among the pagans in the metropolitan, multicultural city of Corinth, those who worship Greek and Roman gods, who have studied their philosophy, this Jesus and those who called him Lord were the object of derision—it was not that they didn't quite understand Christianity, or that they had a reasonable disagreement with it—no, they mocked it—mocked the message of the cross
- When we think of crosses today, we may think of jewellery or statues or images in beautiful cathedrals—the cross is for us not an objectionable image—we see crosses all over the place pretty much every day and we don't find them startling—but I want you to remember that the cross at the time Paul is writing this letter to the church at Corinth is an instrument of torture and public humiliation—it had the same connotation as a noose hanging from a lynching tree might have in past century—it was not pretty—in fact it elicited fear—it was a symbol of the power of the authorities to reduce those under its eye to absolutely nothing—
- But to those who believe, it is not a symbol of the power of the authorities—it is a symbol of the power of God—it is not foolishness, it is not moronic—it is God's holy wisdom—*Sophia*--as the late great theologian James Cone, author of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, put it, "The cross is a paradoxical religious symbol because it inverts the world's value system with the news that hope comes by way of defeat, that suffering and death do not have the last word, that the last shall be first and the first last."
- I think we need to be reminded sometimes after so many years, centuries even, of Christianity here in the Western world being synonymous with respectability and normality that this was not the case for Christians in the earliest centuries of the church—now I know that this is changing and there are more and more voices in our

contemporary world that speak of Christianity in the most derisive language, those who do indeed find it not just “different” but a target of their contempt, and so I want to show you just a little bit of the kind of thing that the Christians in Corinth would have had to put up with

- And I want to do that by showing you the oldest known image of Jesus—the oldest artwork that has been discovered depicting Christ—and he is depicted on the cross—but it is not a painting or a sculpture or a wood carving—the oldest known image of Jesus is graffiti—a graffito (that’s the singular of graffiti) carved into the wall of a structure in Rome, probably around the first or second century, maybe as late as the third—but very, very early in terms of Christian history
- This graffito was discovered in 1857, when the building it’s in was excavated—the building had been walled off and sealed up for at least 1500 years—it had originally been the imperial palace of the Emperor Caligula (he’s the one that wanted to make his horse a member of the Senate—and I imagine he’d have done about as good a job as some senators do today) but after that it became a boarding school for imperial page boys
- The image is inscribed into the wall in one of the rooms—and it looks like this—
 here’s a line drawing that’s clearer—there’s a male figure there with his hand held up, and there’s a cross with a figure on it—and that figure has the body of a man but the head of a donkey. And underneath is written in Greek, “Alexamenos worships his god.”
- Most scholars agree that what this image is meant to do is to mock someone named Alexamenos, who is a Christian. Somebody didn’t think much at all of Alexamenos or his God, and he wanted people to know what he thought of them.

- Pagans in the first few centuries often referred to Christians as donkey worshippers, and although there are differing theories as to why, one thing that is certain is that it was not meant as a compliment—it was meant to be insulting and offensive. Pagans at the time, and other folks too, said that Christians were not only donkey worshippers but incestuous cannibals—and this image is not only insulting to Alexamenos and to Christianity, but to Jesus as well—the underlying message is probably something like “it’s as ridiculous to worship someone who was crucified as it is to worship a donkey—and Alexamenos is foolish—a moron—for doing so.”
- And so when you read that the power of the cross is foolishness to the Gentiles in verse 23—Paul is not saying they think it’s just illogical or unlikely—it’s more than that—they think it’s ludicrous and disgusting—a cross—that’s an instrument of death and degradation and torture—the Greeks were attracted to philosophy—the love of what they thought was “wisdom”—and they wanted a philosophy that would give them a good, happy, pleasant life; gods who would fulfil their desires; teachers who spoke eloquently and intelligently and logically about lofty ideas—not one who talked about sacrifice and taking up your cross—not some jackass who got crucified—that was foolishness
- But to Alexamenos the cross was not foolishness—it was salvation—it was the very power and wisdom of God
- In the very next room of the building where this graffiti is, there’s some more graffiti carved into the wall—the handwriting is different, and it says, in Latin, not in Greek, “*Alexamenos fidelis.*” Alexamenos is faithful. Was this Alexamenos’ personal testimony? His refutation of the words on the other wall? Was this the observation of another graffiti artist who observed how Alexamenos lived? How he worshipped

his God? We don't know—but we do know that while the scribe who mocked Alexamenos and his God has passed away and is forgotten—and all that remains are his taunting words and his blasphemy—Alexamenos lives on—Alexamenos and his God were dismissed as foolishness, but he was found to be faithful, and they remain

- That wise guy who recorded his opinion of Alexamenos, who judged him and his Jesus to be unworthy of his respect and inscribed it on the wall for all to see—he's gone—and I think it's relevant that Paul tells us in verse 19, quoting the prophet Isaiah: For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Verse 20 continues: 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?
- Alexamenos' God was called foolishness—but Alexamenos was faithful.
- And that bring us to our second theme here in these verses: faith.
- Beginning with verse 21, Paul explains that the efforts of both the Greeks and the Jews to find God—to recognise God's power and God's wisdom—have been unsuccessful—because God has revealed Himself in the form of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth, and they've missed it, because they have judged what was revealed according to their standards of wisdom and power—the Jews wanted signs of power from their Messiah, and when they look at Jesus they see weakness, the Messiah was to be a great leader and restore Israel to its rightful place among the nations—he wasn't supposed to be executed by a foreign occupying power who was ruling over their people—and what's more the Law in Deuteronomy says that anyone who hangs on a tree is cursed—how can there be a cursed Messiah? That's foolishness.

- The other New Testament reading from the lectionary for today is from John 2—when Jesus cleanses the temple of the money changers—the Jews then ask him what sign he can show to demonstrate his authority for doing so—and Jesus says “destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” And the Jews completely miss the message of the cross—they don’t understand that Jesus is referring to Himself and not to their man-made temple.
- Now listen to what Paul writes beginning with verse 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 (now notice this—those who are called—the action, the movement STARTS from God’s side, not our efforts—we just have to have ears to hear that call)---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.
- The world did not know God through wisdom, so God decided to save those who believe through the foolishness of our proclamation. That is, without faith, judged by the standards of the Jews and Greeks, the gospel of the cross comes up short—it doesn’t meet the requirements—the message of the cross isn’t wise in the eyes of the Greeks, and it isn’t a sign of power to the Jews—it’s a stumbling block—
- You may remember that a “stumbling block” is what Jesus called Peter in Matthew 16—Jesus had been talking about the message of the cross—how he was to go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly and be killed and raised on the third day—but Peter,

like the Jews that Paul is talking about here in 1 Corinthians, couldn't handle that idea—and Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him—REBUKES Jesus for talking like that—for saying such things—Peter says “forbid it Lord, this must NEVER happen to you.” That's when Jesus says to Peter “Get thee behind me, Satan—you are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things”—that is, you are judging the message of the cross by human standards and not through the eyes of faith.

- The Greek word that is translated “stumbling-block” there in Matthew and here in 1 Corinthians is “*skandalon*.” That's where the English words “scandal” and “scandalous” come from—a scandal is a stumbling block for a politician or a religious leader—it trips them up—hinders them
- One of my favourite Christian musicians is Michael Card, and he released an album back in 1985 that was called “Scandalon.” There was a song on that album called “Scandalon” that was all about how Jesus didn't meet the expectations of those who were looking for a king who would “conquer and kill”
- But there is another song on that album, called “God's Own Fool,” and I remember the first time I heard it just being amazed at the lyrics—I had never heard a Christian song that was so ironic, so paradoxical—that put the “scandal” of the message of the cross so clearly.
- In the song, “God's own fool,” Michael Card is drawing from this passage of scripture in 1 Corinthians and others, and talking about how God's Holy wisdom is foolish to men, about the way that when judged by worldly standards, the message of the cross doesn't look wise or powerful—but it's only through faith that the truth and the wisdom and power of the gospel come to us—not by our being “convinced”

according to our criteria of what “makes sense”—in fact, in order to really “understand” the gospel, to respond to the CALL of the gospel, we have to sacrifice our efforts to “understand” because the truth of the message of the cross is beyond human understanding—it takes faith, and faith is a gift from God, a CALL from God, not something that we can “do” on our own—Michael Card puts it like this:

- surrender the hunger to say you must know, Have the courage to say I believe, For the power of paradox opens your eyes, And blinds those who say they can see

- He goes on:
 - When we in our foolishness thought we were wise, He played the fool and He opened our eyes
 - When we in our weakness believed we were strong, He became helpless to show we were wrong
 - And so we follow God's own fool, For only the foolish can tell--Believe the unbelievable-- come be a fool as well
- When that song came out and was played on Christian radio, there were some folks who did not like it at ALL.
- I remember in Nashville, folks called the radio stations and complained about it—they were incensed and offended—how dare this songwriter refer to Jesus as foolish—as a fool—and even worse, how dare he suggest that THEY were fools—
- I suspect that those people were not very familiar with the first chapter of 1 Corinthians—or all the other places in scripture that this song refers to quite clearly and accurately

- But that reaction really isn't all that surprising—because those folks didn't take time to think about what that song was really about, they just rushed to judgement because they thought somebody was making fun of them, calling them a fool—insulting their religion—and they just shot from the hip, because human nature tends to be proud—and I don't mean that in a good way—we, humans, people, don't want to be identified as something that is beneath us, like a fool—people have a tendency to want to think that they are better than somebody else—whatever that somebody else is and whatever categories we use to judge them—whether it's morality, or spirituality, or education or talent or intelligence or social status or nationality—there are lots of reasons that we can find to feel good about ourselves by looking down on somebody else—by setting ourselves apart from them because we're “better” in some way
- And this was the problem at the church in Corinth—there were all sorts of divisions among the body of Christ, the followers of Jesus there in that multicultural city—all sorts of elitism—social, moral, spiritual, theological
- Paul mentions this right up front in his letter—beginning with verse 10 in Chapter 1—he writes: 10 Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united **in the same mind and the same purpose**. 11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. 12 What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.' 13 Has Christ been divided?
- You should be united **in the same mind and the same purpose**

- But later on we find that the people of the church are divided on the basis of their religious backgrounds and their social status, the things they eat and the way they behave and one of the major problems in the church at Corinth is that, as we see in chapter 12, people want to divide themselves up because of what spiritual gifts they have—we've talked about that over the last few Sundays—but Paul says to them that they're all part of the body of Christ and every member is as important as any other member, and any gifts or resources or talents or abilities that they may have are not to be a source of self-righteousness or arrogance, but they're to be used for the good of the body.
- And so one of the main reasons, if not THE major practical purpose for which Paul writes this letter to the church at Corinth is to discourage division and to encourage fellowship (and that's our third point).
- And because in this letter Paul wants to discourage division and encourage fellowship, Paul reminds the church at Corinth right at the beginning of this letter about the message of the cross—and by pointing to the cross Paul is reminding them that they did not receive the gospel because of their wisdom or the strength of their efforts, but that God came to us in a way that reveals human wisdom and human power to be foolishness and weakness—and so not one of them has any reason to brag or think that they're better than anyone else—the cross not only levels the playing field but shows us that God does not play by our rules just because we think He ought to
- Paul writes beginning with verse 28:
 - 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one might boast in the

presence of God. 30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'

- So there's no room in the church for division, no room to say "look at me, I'm better than that brother or sister" because they think differently or look different or have different gifts—no, **one body, the Body of Christ; one mind, the mind of Christ; one purpose, the message of the cross, which is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.**
- Imagine what would happen if members of the global Christian church would commit ourselves to this high calling—to unity, not uniformity—we'd see revival and restoration and renewal—and I believe we are seeing just that, here in our community, all across this district, and all around the world, as the message of the cross is not only proclaimed with our words but it is lived out in our lives every minute of every day.
- Foolishness, faith and fellowship.
- I hope you'll meditate on these things today and in the days to come—
- God bless you and we look forward to joining you again next time.