

Wisdom?

Sermon by Rev. Mandi Richey

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WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15210
412-835-6630
www.westminster-church.org

Wisdom?

Is it wise or unwise to:

- Shut your fingers in a car door?
- Hit your thumb with a hammer?
- Allow your 16-year old to drive your car?
- Let your child go to that party?
- Invest your money into a 401k?
- Trust your child to make good decisions while off at college?
- Take that job promotion or pay raise even though it will require longer hours and more time away from family?

Background

This morning we will be talking about wisdom. But first, a little about this letter from Paul.

This letter was written by the apostle Paul around 55 AD. Corinth was a thriving port city on the southern tip of modern-day Greece. You can still visit Corinth today. The prevailing culture there was Greek and the Greeks prized philosophy and wisdom. Corinth, however, was well known for its immorality and that is the reason why Paul is writing this letter to the Christians there. Paul has gotten word from a few sources that the church was in trouble there. There were divisions emerging and the Christian message that Paul had preached there was beginning to become skewed and warped. The church was falling into terrible condition. They were arguing over everything. If you can imagine it going on, it was probably happening in Corinth. Paul wrote this letter chiefly to admonish the Corinthians of their behavior and exhort them to return to the ways Christian living he had taught them. They were honoring God with their lips, but their hearts were far from God.

Culture

As we read this morning, the Corinthians were trying to find God through the wisdom of the world – through the rules taught to them by men. Their faith had become empty words. They were trusting their own wisdom rather than trusting God's wisdom. I was curious about why Paul was talking about wisdom so much, so I looked "wisdom" in the dictionary. This is what I found:

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines "wisdom" as:

The ability to discern or judge what is true, right, or lasting; insight, (2) Common sense; good judgment, (3) The sum of learning through the ages; knowledge, (4) Wise teachings of the ancient sages ... you get the idea.

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Then I studied what Paul defined as wisdom and it was this: Christ crucified. No more, no less. Plain and simple. Christ crucified.

Now, the message of the crucified Christ wasn't exactly the most popular idea for people in Paul's day, no matter if they were Jews or Greeks. Neither group thought that Christ crucified was a very wise thing – Paul says that to Jews it was a stumbling block and to Greeks it was foolishness.

For Jews, the notion of a suffering messiah was a contradiction in terms. To be crucified was a sure sign of being a criminal. And for a messiah to be a criminal was offensive to the Jews, not holy wisdom. They expected their messiah to be strong and powerful, to show miraculous signs of God's power, to be a political leader that would lead them out from under their oppressor, Rome. For their long-awaited messiah to be crucified on a cross was unthinkable for the Jews.

Now for Greeks in on the other hand, they had notions of heroes – great teachers and scholars with lots of wisdom. The Greeks preferred those who were skilled at debating and arguing because to them, as Richard Hays notes, “the term ‘wisdom’...can refer to both the possession of exalted knowledge and the ability to express that knowledge in a powerful and rhetorically polished way.” The wisest were treated like the movie stars or rock stars of their day. But scholars and great wise teachers who died in a shameful, humiliating or disgraceful way like being crucified were not very popular with the Greeks, either.

So for both groups, crucified Christ was a problem – it was foolishness. It was a profound shock. Nothing could be more unlikely than redemption coming from crucifixion. Nothing could be more alien to the culture in Paul's day. Even though it was a shock, some had become Christians, which meant that those Jews and Greeks had to confront the fact that their messiah or hero had died in a disgraceful way. And they had come to terms with it and accepted it as good even though the world around them said it was scandalous. The world's wisdom said that to believe in the crucified Christ was foolish, but God's wisdom told them that it was necessary for their salvation; it was the heart of the Gospel. But for them, believing in the foolishness of the crucified Christ was transforming their lives. Is it transforming yours?

(pause)

So often, we try to employ human wisdom to make sense of divine realities, don't we? But for Paul, that's fundamentally the wrong way to go about having a relationship with God. To have a relationship with God, one must put aside what the world says is wise and accept what the world says is foolish. But that is so difficult for us!! We are children of the Enlightenment, Children of the scientific age. We have been taught to think for ourselves and to question things and to think critically and rationally about the world around us. To believe in a crucified messiah is to believe in something the world around us would name as foolish. But because we are Christians, we must see the world differently because God has shown the wisdom of this world to be foolish. We must strive to live in the light of the wisdom of God.

Now, before you all get upset with me, I'm not saying the being educated is a bad thing. And it's not bad to ask questions, either. Education is a great thing, don't get me wrong – hey, I'm the education pastor, so I really like education and think that it is very important. (Kids, you should stay in school and go to college!) What can happen, though, with education, is that we can become like the Greeks and hold up those who are knowledgeable and wise in the eyes of humans. This in and of itself isn't bad. It's good to admire people that are educated and wise. But if we hold up those people too high and only go to them when we have questions instead of to God, this can hinder our faith and our relationship with God. Remember, we can't have a relationship with God based only on believing the "right" things or the "right" doctrines or being educated. That will only get us so far. We must enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ, the risen one, the wisdom of God.

So what does this scripture mean to us/me now? So what? Why is this real and relevant to me today?

So why should I care about a two thousand year old debate about which wisdom to trust? Because my faith depends upon it, that's why. As Christians, we are in a season of preparation – Lent. It is a season of darkness when we take a step back and re-evaluate life and how we are living it. We remember the suffering of Christ. And some of us remember our own suffering.

At the end of Lent is Holy Week. At the end of Holy Week is Friday. Good Friday. We remember our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who was crucified on a cross for our sins. Now tell me – what parent would think it wise to allow a son to be killed? The answer? The Almighty Father. Now to us, as humans with finite minds, we think that this is crazy. No parent would allow a child to be killed if they could stop it, right? But the truth is that God could have stopped Christ's death and God didn't. God allowed it to happen. God heard the cries of the Christ and did not stop them. And why? Because in God's wisdom, God was saving us through Christ. God knew that Christ would be exalted and glorified. God knew Christ's death was for everyone. You might even go so far as to say that Christ's death was good. That God used the suffering of the Son to bring us joy. The joy of salvation and relationship with God. But this doesn't make sense in human wisdom, does it? We have a hard time wrapping our minds around such a horrible and terrible act, yet this act of God is the foundation of our faith. (pause) We need to feel the pain of Good Friday to know the indescribable joy of Easter Sunday.

You see, we live in a culture here in America that says that the good guys should always win. That if I make good choices and do the right thing, that I'll be successful in life and happy. But then bad things happen to us or the people that we care about. And we ask God - Why? Why do bad things happen? Why is there suffering in the world? Is this suffering that I'm going through now, God, part of your wisdom? Why would a "good" God allow such things to happen?

But who's defining what "good" means here? Is it you or me or is it God? Remember, God sacrificed his only Son for us and called that good. Good Friday. And look at the outcome –

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salvation for all of humanity. The joy of being able to be in a relationship with the Almighty through the risen Christ. Remember, friends, that God doesn't let things happen to us that didn't happen to him already. God knows the pain of loss and suffering.

So during the remainder of this Lenten season, as we struggle together toward Easter, I encourage and challenge you to take a step back. Ask yourself what wisdom you are trusting. (pause) Whose wisdom it is? Is it yours? The world's? God's?

Have you allowed the wisdom of God, the foolishness of the Gospel, to permeate your life? Even the parts you're not proud of or haven't shown anyone or told anyone about?

We should strive together to live out the foolishness of the gospel of Christ crucified because this and this alone is true wisdom.

Thanks be to God. Amen.