



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “THE WISDOM OF GOD”

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 22:23-31; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, February 28, 2021  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

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. For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’

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? 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. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

**People: Thanks be to God.**

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Some 2000 years ago, the man we know as the Apostle Paul – he was inspired by God to write a rhetorically powerful letter to a young and energetic church in a city called Corinth. In our reading this morning, Paul communicates that the act of living and loving as a community of faith – it is about taking very, very seriously the message of the cross – which is the Gospel. And what is the Gospel?

Well, a little later in this same letter, Paul will say in 1 Corinthians 15, he’ll say exactly what the Gospel is, but I want you to pay careful attention to his choice words as he introduces the Gospel. They are, in fact, quite similar to the language that Paul will later use when introducing the Lord’s Supper. He says, “For I have handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received...”

So what Paul is about to say, these aren't his own words. And when he institutes the Holy Supper, these are words that God has given to him. "For I have handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day ...."

That is the Gospel! And it all starts with God. In other words, this is not Paul's Table any more than this is Paul's Gospel. The message of the cross is something that God has initiated – it is God's story of salvation. And this very message of the cross for which we prepare ourselves throughout the season of Lent – Paul goes on to say that it is "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."

But how is that we might ask? I mean, surely Paul is not suggesting that there is anything foolish about God! No, certainly not! God is not foolish - God is Sovereign and God is righteous – God is the very embodiment of wisdom! Now, we on the other hand...we are frail, and we are fallen – and we see in that mirror dimly. I dare say, we are like the Jews in the sense that we have witnessed God's mighty acts throughout history. We have seen the pillars of cloud and fire and smoky mist. We have seen the bushes that burned but were not consumed. We have been profoundly influenced by the signs of God's power revealed in the Passover and the Exodus, and it is through such signs and miracles that we often seek to determine if what we are experiencing is in fact divine or if it is something else.

This is why in the Bible we witness the Scribes and the Pharisees asking Jesus for signs. It is why the people, why they too asked Jesus for a sign. In John 6:30: "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?" Even kings wanted signs. In Luke 23:8 we read: "When Herod saw this, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him (Jesus) and was hoping to see him perform some sign."

Oh, we are undoubtedly like the Jews; but we are also very much like the Gentiles...the Greeks we might say, for as surely as we are constantly on the lookout for dramatic demonstrations of the power of God, we also look for logical explanations. In Acts chapter 17, Paul is waiting for Silas and Timothy in Athens, and he is discouraged by what he finds in the city, and he ends up arguing with the people in the Synagogue and the marketplace. We are told, beginning in verse 18: "Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, 'What does this babbling man want to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.' (This is because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So, they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, 'May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us; we want to know what it means.'"

To the Jew and the Gentile – to the world – that neither signs nor knowledge nor reason...that none of this can adequately describe God's action in the world. That's why the cross is such a problem for the world and for so many who live in it. Indeed, there were a great many who wanted Christ to be differently triumphant...a Christ who conquered Rome, established the theocracy of God...not a Christ crucified. And to hear such things...in order to win we must lose...the last shall be first, the idea that God Almighty would take the form of a servant, that God would cast upon his Son the sins of the world and be nailed to a tree, there's nothing powerful

about a tree! That doesn't make sense. It's just not logical...or so the world said and still says today.

In verse 18 of this morning's New Testament Lesson, Paul reminds us of something God had said many years prior: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Those words were first spoken by the Prophet Isaiah, and they remind us that this has been God's plan from the beginning. You see, our sign seeking skepticism, that's a problem...it is our knowledge that really gets in the way. "God, give us a sign," we say, to which our Savior responds: "No sign will be given except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was for three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth."

"God, give us knowledge," we say. "Enlighten our minds." And to that query the Bible makes very clear in Hebrews chapter 1: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds." In other words, Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God's love...there is nothing else for us to understand...nothing left for us to discern! Just because the world might not understand God's work in Christ...even though the world may at times treat it like a joke – the tomb is nevertheless empty...we do not need the world to believe it in order for it to be so. Christ is risen as he said. To not believe in him, we know that to be the greatest expression of foolishness! Make no mistake about it -- the God who lived and died, the God who in Jesus Christ our Lord was buried and yet rose again -- that is the God in whom we place our trust! That is the story of salvation, which is by no means dependent upon signs or knowledge...and that is the Gospel that we are invited to share!

And let it also be known that it is not dependent upon us either! And herein lies the wisdom one might say, the very genius of God, and yet it is so darn confounding to the world. Paul says in verse 26, "not many of you were wise by human standards, not many of you were powerful, not many of you were of noble birth." In other words, it's not about us, which is to say that we have been saved by grace through faith, not our own doing; it is the gift of God. Those with whom we come in contact, they are not brought to faith by any keen intellect we may have, or our power or own prestige. It is not our nearly 300 year-old heritage here at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church that brings somebody to faith! No! Men and women are given to the heart and mind of Christ by the wondrous workings of God.

Billy Sunday, a former major league baseball player turned pastor who was famous, or infamous one might say, for his antics and was viewed by some as God's joke on the ministry. Still, Billy Sunday's rallies proclaimed the Gospel to more than a million men and women. The story goes that after Billy Sunday preached in Charlotte, North Carolina, a men's group prayed that God would do even greater things in their city. And so, they invited another evangelist, Mordecai Helm, to come and preach. If you know the story, it is said that Mordecai Helm, by God's grace, led a young man by the name of Billy Graham to faith (Lectionary Homiletics).

Dwight L. Moody was a shoe salesman before he was called to the ministry. He never had the benefit of much formal education –it could have been 5th grade, some people speculate. Early in Moody's career, he was invited to conduct a series of rallies in England. One prominent church

pastor who was also a noted scholar, F.B. Meyer, he was reluctant to let Moody into the pulpit. Meyer worried that Moody's poor grammar would offend his educated congregation. But after he saw tears streaming down the faces of some of his most sophisticated parishioners, Meyer's estimation of what God might be able to do through a person, even like Moody, it drastically changed (Lectionary Homiletics). You see, we are human. We may not be famous – we may not be brilliant – we may not have positions of authority, but each and every one of us are ambassadors for Christ and we are called to share the very good news of the Gospel.

I often return to that Biblical assertion that “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven like a little child shall not enter therein,” because children, they don't need signs...they don't depend upon reason...they trust, and they believe. When we baptized Alex this morning, we baptized him into future repentance of faith, and with great hope and anticipation we look forward to that time when he will claim God's love for himself. In the meantime, we affirm and do believe that God loves him – loves all of us, even before we can respond in faith. And hearing a statement like that, well the world might say, “Well, that's ridiculous,” but it is the truth!

In this way and in so many others, there are still those who suggest that the world has not changed very much since Paul wrote his letter to the church in Corinth. To be certain, God's ways continue to surprise those who are expecting God to act in a certain way. God's ways continue to confound the wise. The cross of Christ, it continues to be a stumbling block, and, in fact, foolishness to a world that would seek to control it or considerate as one option among many, or worse, treats it with contempt!

The cross of Christ is not about signs; it is certainly more than meets the eye. Nor is the cross about knowledge, for no amount of reason can begin to understand the extent to which God has gone to love us. The cross of Christ is about God's love, a love that lived and died and rose again so that we might have life and life abundant. That is the message of the cross. And that, dear Friends, is the Gospel.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

\*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.