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Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
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The Word of the Cross is Where God's Wisdom Finds Expression

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

INI

To the church of God, to those who are sanctified and called into the fellowship of Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

1 Corinthians 1:18–31

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

*"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent."*

²⁰Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. ²²For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; ²³but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, ²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

This Word of the Lord is spoken for you today.

The Word of the Cross is Where God Wisdom Finds Expression

1. Scandalous to those who seek earthly signs
2. Foolishness to those who rationalize
3. The power of salvation toward us who believe

Let us pray, O Lord God, Most Wise, as we consider Your holy Word today, use the proclamation of the cross to destroy pride that is in us, that you might raise up a faith which trusts in the death and resurrection of Jesus as our source of salvation alone.
Amen.

What makes a word real? I stumbled across a TED lecture featuring language historian and English professor Anne Curzan. In her talk she asks the question: What makes a word real? Well, is it in the dictionary? We often say: "look it up in a dictionary," but

how often do we spend time wondering where that dictionary came from. Its as if this un-authored authority has just dropped into our world from above.

Anne works on a dictionary committee; a collection of people who spend their time listening to us. She points out that dictionaries are human; changing, adjusting, listening – meaning, Cruzan argues, dictionaries are not timeless; they are not all knowing; and they too need to be questioned.

So what makes a word real? Or for that matter what makes an idea real? What about a message? What about an assertion; a claim; a thought; a philosophy; a truth? What makes a truth true and a belief worth believing? What makes this word real; this word we consider today? Can we be sure the message of the cross real; true; reliable? Or does this too need to be questioned; subjected to human scrutiny; does this message change with the times?

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

In Greek, Paul writes: *Ho' logos tou staurou*. I'd like you to think about that Greek word: "logos." From this we get English words like: logic, theo-logy, psycho-logy. The NKJV translates "message." The ESV "word." Here is the definition my Greek dictionary offers: "a communication whereby the mind finds expression."

The logos of the cross is a communication whereby the mind of God finds expression. The cross of Christ expresses God's thoughts. That is to say, the cross is an expression of the reason, the logic, the wisdom of God Himself. Without the word of the cross we could never know God; who He is or how we are to understand Him. And yet, to the world, it is foolishness.

19 For it is written:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,

And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent."

20 Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 22 For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom;

The world responds, "foolishness." How else could they respond? A man has just come through the temple, yelling and swinging a whip of cords, "Get out of here! Be

gone! You have no business here!” This strange fellow comes storming through the Temple, snapping his whip, scattering money all over the place, throwing tables aside; he forces out the bankers, the currency exchange agents, even the farmers and ranchers. Jesus was expressing a logos. How else could the Jews respond? “You’re crazy!” What gives you the right? And so they ask, “What sign do you give us?”

They were looking for an earthly sign. Who was this Jesus to disrupt their Temple business? After all, the Temple was overseen by the chief priests. They were the ones responsible for allowing these money changers to work in the Temple courts. And they had a good arrangement set up. It helped the economy; it profited the Temple tax; and it made things much easier for worshippers: they could get in, get out, and get on without much hassle. But now this Rabbi comes along and starts stirring up trouble. “What sign do you give us?”

But Jesus responds with just one foolish word: “Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

And so we look for signs. After all, who is Jesus, to disrupt our business? Who is Jesus to come into our lives and act as if there is something wrong with us; as if something needed overturning? So we ask for a sign. When things get overturned, we’d like Jesus to show us why. When our misplaced trust in money and house, health and self, happiness and haughtiness, is poured out and spilled out all over the place, we are looking for some higher authority to explain things to us; what gives you the right? When Jesus comes through our lives and our churches, yelling, swinging a whip, driving out demons, chastising the habits of our sinful flesh, what else can we say: You’re crazy! What right do you have to stir up trouble? And so we ask, “What sign do you give us?”

As the Greek expresses it: a skandalon. It is scandalous; a story that offends us; it makes us stumble. How can Jesus rebuild in three days what we have spent years, lifetimes constructing? In the wisdom of this world, we resist the idea of destroying something we’ve worked so hard for; we don’t like the idea of sacrificing convenience; giving up money or house, healthy or self, happiness or haughtiness in order for Jesus to rebuild something new. Our flesh wants a different sort of Messiah; one that will satisfy us with earthly signs; that will reward our hard work and our growing desires. And we stumble over this question: what sign do you give us?

But God does not express his wisdom in the signs of this life. He does not offer us earthly answers to heavenly issues. Instead He offers us the cross. And the world responds: “It is foolishness.”

How else could they respond? The Greeks knew wisdom and this idea of a crucified Savior was foolish reasoning. After all, the society of the Greeks was built on words. Words and reasoning and education was the way to success. Words, words, words.

This was the issue facing the Corinthians. As Paul writes to them, he addresses a congregation that is divided. Divided over doctrine; divided over preference. It was a competition to see who could be the best, who could know the most, who could accomplish the most, who had the best gifts. Some liked the preaching of Paul; others, Apollos. Each choosing the pastor who best suited their needs. It was a war of words; and the question was, who's gonna get in the last word?

Anne Cruzan says that dictionary committees are listening for the last word. Listening to us. She argues that what makes a word real, is usage, usage usage. This means the authority is you; you are the decision makers on what our language is or is to become. "If a community of speakers is using a word, and knows what it means," Cruzan says, "it's real. It might be illogical, slangy, unnecessary, but that word that we're using ... That word is real"

And doesn't that same thinking seem to penetrate our Christian churches? The changing word. What makes God's word real? Is it because a human committee sanctions it? Sometimes this is how people speak of the Bible. Something that is based on usage. "If a community of Christians is using a word, that makes it real." This makes us the authority; the decision makers. Consensus is what makes a Bible teaching real. And pretty soon, we lose all sense of objectivity; there no longer is moral truth that rules us; no longer is our God a jealous God. The ten commandments are left to a person's own interpretation; homosexuality; divorce; abortion; assisted suicide – each as real to you as the words you speak about them? The idea that there is only one answer to these questions seems like foolishness.

So it becomes a competition. "I am of Luther," but "I am of Calvin." "I am non-denominational." A war of shifting words. Words that divide us. Shifting words of the law that enter our congregation and divide us. Words that excuse us; the words that hurt others; the words we cannot take back; cannot give up; cannot back down from; cannot say over again. What are we communicating to one another? And the more we rely on a shifting theology of the law; the more we are divided; and the more our fellowship becomes a competition for who can get in the last word.

22 For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, 24 but to those who

*are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.
25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger
than men.*

The Word of the Cross is where God's wisdom finds expression: It is scandalous to those who seek earthly signs; it is foolishness to those who rationalize; but it is the power of salvation toward us who believe.

In a word, God ends all disputes. In His own logos, His own logic, His own wisdom, His own Word made flesh, God puts an end to all human dispute. He destroys what we have said and rebuilds something new. There on the cross, there are no words left; no other argument to get us out of this; no reasoning a way of escape. In this word God expresses what is on his mind.

The word of the cross is where God's wisdom finds expression. And there he expresses his thoughts: I will not excuse you; I will save you. I will become your sin. I will give up what is most precious to me, most perfect, without blemish; and I will express my love for you there on the cross. I will lay down what is most dear and pour out my wrath on My own Son so you might be saved. And I will raise him up. I will rebuild what you have destroyed; I will cleanse My Temple, and I will cleanse and restore you in Christ; for you will to be a Temple for Me. And this is My final word.

The cross and resurrection of Christ is God's last word. And he will have the last word. When hurtful words rise up against you and you cannot seem to find the right response – God will have the last word. When you are distraught in a time of affliction and all the words of wisdom that people offer you seem to do no good – God will have the last word. When accusations of conscience make you doubt your salvation – Jesus cries out from the cross, "It is finished!" and God has the last word.

Destroy this Temple; and in three days, I will raise it up. I will raise it up, a new creation. A new Temple, a new home for you and I to dwell in together. We are raised up. A new creation. A fellowship which is united: not in the many words of human wisdom, but in the word of the cross. And this word matters. This word of the cross now becomes how we think; how we talk; how we deal with one another. You are now means whereby the mind of God finds expression.

And so a Christian like Pastor James Sandeen takes up the cross in his mind and on his lips, and the wisdom of God finds expression. Pastor Sandeen is entering into his second round of chemo treatment for bone cancer. He doesn't know whether it will be

enough. The possibility of a bone marrow transplant cannot be ruled out. And he writes in a recent email,

"I am scheduled for another bone marrow biopsy which will help see if the chemo killed all of the leukemia blasts, or if any are still lurking or possibly coming back. Whatever, that will determine the next days of treatment, whether some more chemo may be necessary or bone marrow transplant or neither. Of course, it would be nice not to have to have either, but whatever, more important is that the Lord's Will will be done, and we know how good & gracious His will is, as we all celebrate the Passion of our Lord, Who has brought us eternal remission through His cross, which gives confidence and great hope for each day, & that day. These are thoughts echoed from Jeremiah's Book of Tears in our devotion today, with the cross overarching Carol thought (& me too) in some earlier verses of chapter 3:

And I said, "My strength and my hope Have perished from the LORD." Remember my affliction and roaming, The wormwood and the gall. My soul still remembers And sinks within me. This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope. Through the LORD'S mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "Therefore I hope in Him!" The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, To the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should hope and wait quietly For the salvation of the LORD. (Lam 3:18-26 NKJ)

And God's wisdom finds expression; through the cross and resurrection – because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Cruzan is right. Dictionaries are human creations; they are constantly changing, adjusting, listening. But the word of the cross is different. It was not constructed by human wisdom. What makes this word real is that it was resurrected by God? In God's wisdom, all human wisdom was destroyed on the cross and the true wisdom that comes by faith was resurrected – a reconstruction and resurrection of what God intended. The resurrection is our authority which proves Jesus' right to be our Savior – a timeless truth.

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