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## What Is Wisdom?

a sermon on Proverbs 1.20-33 & 1 Corinthians 1.18-25

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America today has the most brilliant culture in history. We thrive on learning. We take pride in our know-how. We have more information and more access to it than any other culture, ever. And yet, we are fools. We have forgotten how to live, what to live for, and who we are. We have gained the world and lost our souls – the ultimate fool's bargain.

We have pushed religion to margin of life. We value it because we value individual expression, but when it comes to making decisions ... when it comes to having a reason for the way we do things ... we ignore it. We have tried to have community without faith, morality without a moral absolute, and freedom (defined as the right to do whatever I want) without consequences.

The whole Western world over the past two hundred years has managed to do the seemingly impossible; we have made ourselves to be, at the same time, nothing more than animals and nothing less than gods. Think about that: nothing more than animals, because if you take God out of the equation, then we are here by chance. We are nothing more than wonderfully complicated biological machines – animals, just like all the other animals. And yet, the result is, we become little gods, because if there is no God, then nothing stands above us. There is no moral law, because there is no moral lawgiver. No right and wrong, only preferences.

Last week I introduced the book of Proverbs and the wisdom literature in the Bible. I said that in the biblical wisdom tradition, there are only two ways: the way of the wise and righteous, which leads to life and blessings, and the way of the foolish and wicked, which leads to death and destruction. Our culture, in abandoning its Christian roots, has chosen the path of autonomy – to live as if God does not exist. Which of the two ways do you think that is? The problem for us, as Christians, is that everything gets turned around. On one hand, we are trying to follow Jesus Christ. On the other hand, we live in a culture with a very different way of looking at things. Our culture's ideas and values and moral standards seep into us without us even realizing it. It's like the air we breathe. How could we not be affected? Living in two different worlds, as we are, we sometimes can't tell which end is up.

What is wisdom? What is foolishness? Which is crazier, to say there is no god ... or to say he became a man and died on a cross? Either Christianity is the most ridiculous farce ever – and many of the people who shape our culture think it is, the people who influence others: many university professors, most of the people who create your television programming and the movies you watch, many in positions of leadership and power – they think orthodox Christianity, *real* Christianity is foolish. Either they are right ... *or* Christianity is the one solid truth we can hold onto. It is, as Paul said, “the power of God.” Sometimes what appears foolish turns out to be wisdom, and the wisest among us turn out to be fools.

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians because the church there had a problem. If we want to get the right meaning out of this passage, we do well to keep that problem in mind. It was: the church in Corinth was badly divided into factions. Each little group felt superior to the others. Each one pointed to a different apostle as its inspiration, except for the “Christ only” party. Instead of love and harmony, division ruled. Church became not a family united for mission and worship, but a contest to see who could be the most spiritual, and the wisest. Paul perceived that pride in their own wisdom was driving the divisions. He attacked the problem at its root, but he did it in a clever way. He didn’t charge in from the front. He snuck in by the back way. He contrasted God’s wisdom and the world’s wisdom, and got them all on board with him, before coming around later in the letter to point the finger at them [3.18-21].

What had happened was this: The Christians in Corinth had absorbed the values of the pagan culture around them. It all happened so naturally and so quietly that they didn’t even know it was happening. Of course, at this stage, they were all converts to the faith. None of them had grown up Christian because the faith was too new. When they came into the church, they brought some baggage with them: ideas and values from the paganism they had left behind.

If there was one thing Greek culture admired, it was wisdom. The more intelligent and wise a person was, the better he or she was. Everyone knew that. No one questioned it. Knowledge and wisdom makes you better than other people; that was just how they looked at things. Paul is going to disagree with this later in his letter. If you’ve ever been to a wedding, you’ve heard 1 Corinthians 13, the famous chapter on love. “If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge ... but I do not have love, I am ...” What? What did Paul say he would be if he knew everything but did not have love? Nothing! “I am nothing” [v. 2]. Christianity and paganism were butting heads, each looking at things in an almost opposite way from the other. Paul was showing the Christians in Corinth that they were following paganism, not Christianity. Paganism cares who is better than whom. Pagans worry about status. Christians love, at least they do when they act like Christians. Christians do not trample over one another in a race to be the best. Why? Because at the heart of Christianity stands the cross.

That brings us back to our New Testament reading. What is wisdom? What is foolishness? Everyone in Paul's world (everyone who was not a Christian) through Christianity was not just misguided but stupid and offensive. Jews, Paul wrote, demand signs. I don't blame them. They grew up on the Old Testament. When Moses confronted Pharaoh and led the children of Israel to the Promised Land, God sent one sign after another. Jesus did perform signs, so did some of the apostles, according to the book of Acts. The resurrection was *the* sign that proved without a doubt that Jesus is the Messiah. But look at it from the point of view of a typical Jew in a city where Paul preached. What sign did that person get? A sermon about the cross! The message of the cross offended Jews. They knew from the Law of Moses that anyone hung on a tree was cursed by God. To suggest the Messiah had been crucified?! Well, that was ridiculous.

The same held true for Gentiles. Paul said the Greeks wanted wisdom. They wanted a persuasive message, one that intuitively made sense to them. The cross didn't make sense at all. Crucifixion was shameful; it was scandalous. Decent people stayed as far away from it as possible. The symbols of pagan religions were symbols of power and fertility. The cross was the opposite of those. It was how the Empire got rid of human scum. Nothing could be more foolish than God-in-the-flesh hanging on the cross.

So Paul wrote, the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. *But*, to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. To those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is 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. In the rest of the letter he is going to build on this insight and say that the cross shows us how to live. As one commentator, one of my professors from seminary, put it, "The wisdom of this world seeks its own advantage no matter how much it hurts others; the wisdom of the cross serves others with no regard to personal cost" [David Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary, p. 67].

Our situation is not much different from theirs. We live, as they did, in a culture that does not perceive the truth and power of the cross. We are constantly in danger, as they were, of absorbing the values of the world around us and acting more like pagans than Christians. The dangers come from many directions. For them, one way was obsession with status and wisdom as a way to achieve it. For us it can be many things. For example, how to determine what is right and what is wrong. Christians decide what is right and wrong by consulting scripture, thinking theologically, and applying the test of "love your neighbor as yourself." Twenty-first century American culture decides what is right and wrong by means of the formula "I can do whatever I want, as long as I do not harm someone else too directly." Has the church in our day absorbed that criteria? Of course it has. A recent survey revealed that three out of four ordained ministers in the Presbyterian Church (USA) support some legal recognition of homosexual unions

[reported by the Covenant Network of Presbyterians in their Fall 2009 newsletter and on [www.covenantnetwork.org](http://www.covenantnetwork.org)]. More than a third support same-sex marriage [same source].

But let's not point the finger at others. Our culture says religion is a private matter, something you don't talk about so that you don't offend anyone or make anyone uncomfortable. Have we absorbed this way of thinking? We have absorbed it so thoroughly that most of us never share our faith. We are uncomfortable talking about Jesus or God or the Bible even with family and close friends. Some Christian parents feel uncomfortable talking about the faith with their own children. Why? Isn't it true? Isn't it important? Isn't it a question of life and death? The part of Paul's letter we most need to hear is "to us who are being saved it is the power of God." "The power of God" – we need more of that. We need to let it loose in our lives.

One more example, something I have already talked about recently. We live in a consumer culture, and we tend to approach everything as consumers. "What's in it for me?" To approach church that way is dangerous. To approach God that way is death. God is not a corporation whose future depends on keeping his customers happy. He is the sovereign Lord of the universe, full of grace and love. He will give you more than you could ever dream, but he gives it his way and on his terms. His way is the way of the cross. Jesus calls us to follow him despite the cost. When we accept the cross, we no longer ask, "What's in it for me?" We give of ourselves in love, as Christ did.

I hope you know I am not reprimanding you. As a congregation we have some dedicated, faithful people. But just because we are sincere, and our hearts are in the right place, does not mean we are out of danger. The larger culture is always pressing in around us, subtly influencing our thoughts and attitudes. We must be vigilant. We must be *wise*. The best way to spot a lie is to know the truth.

What is wisdom? What is foolishness? If the gospel is true, it is wisdom; and the wisdom of the world is foolishness. If it isn't, then of course the world is right. A person has to pick a side and stick with it. What makes no sense is to accept the gospel but live like everyone else in the world who does not. ... No one said it would be easy.

Paul attacks wisdom, and Proverbs exalts it, but both are really saying the same thing. When I read these passages, I get the sense that they have the same message but addressed to different audiences. I do not want to read into these passages something that is not there. They only have two things in common. One is the idea of wisdom, though they develop that idea differently. Paul contrasts the wisdom of the world with the wisdom of God. Proverbs calls anyone who will listen to heed wisdom. The other thing they have in common is the insight that true wisdom always takes God into account.

Proverbs 1.7 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” If we were reading the book straight through, these words would still be in mind when we got to our Old Testament reading just a few verses later. Also, verse 29 (in our reading) says fools bring trouble on themselves “Because they hated knowledge *and did not choose the fear of the Lord.*” Proverbs and Paul agree then that true wisdom acknowledges God and honors him as God.

Here is what I love about the Proverbs passage: Wisdom goes out into the streets and shouts for the attention of anyone who will listen. To appreciate this, consider how often worldly wisdom has been jealously guarded. Wisdom belongs to the elites. The rabble cannot handle it. That has been the attitude in many times and places. Again, it goes back to wisdom as a means to status. “We have wisdom so we are better than other people,” the worldly wise imagine. God’s wisdom is the opposite. God’s wisdom goes out into the streets, crying out to anyone who will listen. It reminds me of the parable Jesus told about a king who threw a wedding party for his son. When the invited guests refused the invitation, he told his servants, “Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests” [Mt 22.9-10].

This Proverbs passage is one of many places in scripture where we see God’s gracious desire that everyone know him. His truth is right in front of us, if only we have eyes to see it. Another instance is Romans 1, where Paul says every human being is without excuse before God because deep down we know the difference between right and wrong. If we say we don’t, we’re kidding ourselves. The truth is there. It is not far. It is not hidden. It may not be what we want to hear. It may seem foolish to those of us accustomed to the world’s way of thinking. But God’s truth is there for anyone who can see it.

The brilliant and wise can see it – great thinkers, scholars, and leaders. Some of the most brilliant people in the world are Christians. For every scientist who does not believe in God, there is one who does. At the same time, you do not have to be brilliant to recognize the truth about Jesus. Many average people are believers. Many of below average intelligence. God is not jealous with his wisdom. He puts it out there for anyone willing to open his or her eyes and face reality.

I said our two scripture readings preached the same message to different audiences. The Corinthians letter preaches to believers. What is wisdom? God’s wisdom is the cross. Proverbs preaches to unbelievers – in a way – at least it invites faith. The proverbs passage pictures God’s wisdom imploring people to listen. We see God’s heart in this passage. It reminds me of Jesus and the Father in the parable of the prodigal, who ran to meet his son. God pleads with you to hear his call.

With the call comes a warning. The Proverbs passage warns of consequences for those who do not listen. They refuse wisdom and thereby bring destruction upon themselves.

Humankind, over the past hundred years, has brought a lot of destruction upon itself. In our personal lives we have done the same. Our culture is probably doing that right now. Whenever we choose the way of autonomy – to live as if God does not exist (and it is how we live, not what we say, that matters) – we go the way of death and ruin. It doesn't matter who it is – a person, a nation, a culture, a group, a church, a denomination, you, or me. If we do not acknowledge and honor God, we are like a guy who rams his head into a brick wall over and over again because he refuses to admit it is there.

What is wisdom? What is foolishness? Which is crazier, to say there is no god ... or to say he became a man and died on a cross? Which is more insane, to live for yourself, answering to no one and acknowledging no higher law ... or to pour out your life in self-giving love? Our culture thinks Christianity is offensive, dangerous, foolish. Even we Christians, in our brokenness and under the influence of our culture, have trouble giving everything to Christ. We want to hedge our bets. We want the glory of Easter without the cross. ...

What is wisdom? ... Wisdom is calling. Do you hear?

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