

1 Corinthians 1:26-31 4th Sunday after Epiphany January 28, 1996

¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." ²⁰Where 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? ²¹For 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. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. ²⁶Consider 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. ²⁷But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹so that no one might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

It was a winter Saturday morning. Ten or twelve of the offspring of my grandfather Schlessman were picking cracked corn kernels out of a layer of seed corn that moved by us on a belt. I was the youngest, eight or nine years old. Suddenly the boredom was broken by a smashed pigeon egg mingled with corn kernels. The workman in charge stopped the belt and summoned the highest authority at the seed business and in our family, grandpa.

Grandpa entered. Judge, prosecuting attorney, hangman all rolled into one. I was terrified. "Who did this?" he demanded. I had but one desire, to save my neck. One of them down there, I testified. The culprit was soon collared. Work began once more.

With the work came the small talk. I volunteered some of my thoughts wanting to get back into the good graces of my cousins. I can still feel the righteous indignation I felt as I told them of Scott, my neighbor who had gotten me in trouble. I can't stand tattle tales, I declared.

I can still feel the sarcasm in the words that came back at me: You can't stand tattle tales, what do you think you just did when Grandpa came in.

All of the righteous rage I had heaped upon Scott now was heaped on me.

Long before Paul wrote the letter which contains our second lesson for today he had been a disdainer of Jesus Christ. He had been a ringleader in the bunch that was dedicated to showing

the truth about Jesus and his followers. Surely he had laughed at the notion of a dying man being savior. Jesus had been crucified, stripped of his clothes, stripped of every protection, laughed at ridiculed. The only thing more ridiculous than Jesus was the people who believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

Paul had the very same disdain for Christians that many in our day have. That we would believe that a man who lived and died two thousand years ago is the savior of the world is simply ridiculous for many. That we would believe that Jesus was raised from the dead makes us seem really stupid to some. That we would believe that God will judge us not on our own deeds and our own goodness but through what God has done in Christ - that just leaves some shaking their heads at us.

Paul was doing that kind of head shaking when Jesus stopped him, blinded him to make him see, turned him upside down. With all his own words still ringing in his ears, he writes to the Corinthians:

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters, not many of you were wise by human standards, 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 bring to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

Those of us who grew up on a picture of Jesus tending the lambs in the green pastures and beside the still waters may never understand Paul's words. But go down to the bar on a Saturday night and listen how Jesus' name is used. Go to Harvard and hear how Stephen Jay Gould regards the Christian belief that God has created. Or if we could only hear what some of the politicians say behind closed doors, then we would know what the world regards as foolish and weak and despised. All the disdain Paul had once heaped on Christians is now heaped on him, like my disdain for Scott that came back on me. But with a great difference: What the world mocks in Christ is indeed the wisdom of God, and the power of God, and the highest work of God, Jesus dying for us. Paul says: "Jesus became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption."

I wanted my cousins to admire me - to think me wise, to envy me. They knew I was really foolish, little, afraid.

I want to be somebody. Like Paul wanted to be somebody and thought he was. He came from an honored family, he had a great education, he was a doer of good deeds. But after he met Jesus all of that was garbage, trash. Jesus was everything.

God gives you Jesus, Jesus who was crucified. Jesus enables you to hold your head high. For Jesus is God's gift to you - Jesus, whom the world disdains.

Paul says that there is nothing to boast of but him. Nothing matters but his giving himself for you, Jesus giving himself to you - all of his wisdom, all of his good deeds, all of his holiness, all of this is God's gift to you.

The world will laugh, think us fools. But you are chosen by God to belong to Jesus - today and forever.