

## Divine foolishness

Christ crucified is God's clearest and most complete act of love



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*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" (1 Corinthians 1:18-19).*

Uh oh. Paul wrote this to the Corinthians who were going astray. They were quite

smitten with the elegant formulas of the Greek philosophers. The wisdom of the wise was a good thing. Foolishness, on the other hand, was considered a moral defect. They had become boastful, and Paul had to remind them that not many of them were wise or powerful or noble according to the standards of the world.

The Corinthians had begun to believe that their own effort and understanding was the basis of their life and faith. It's clear they had not read Martin Luther's explanation of the third article of the Apostles' Creed.

Their cultural context is not so different from our own. We value knowledge and power and privilege. And while it might have been true that not many in the Corinthian church were "wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (verse 26) we are now. We can't claim to be the 99 percent. We *are* the 1 percent. So what does that mean for the church today?

I remember the moment in a lecture hall in divinity school when I came to the abrupt and shocking realization that theology was not rocket science. This was quite disappointing because I was in a university full of actual rocket scientists. How could I hope to be taken seriously by other disciplines in the university—by the law school, the medical school, the business school—when what I was studying was the life and times of a Galilean preacher? I longed for a

lab coat, a briefcase, even a calculator—anything that would demonstrate that my discipline was just as sophisticated, and therefore valuable, as any other.

I wonder, sometimes, if the church is a little embarrassed by the foolishness of the cross. The foolishness is not just that the brutal and humiliating crucifixion of Jesus is actually the way God's love was manifested, but that God's love is so complete. This is the overwhelming simplicity of God. God loves us completely. There is no way or any need to dress that up. It just is.

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We often obscure God with our "realistic," "wise" and "clever" schemes. So we set about launching programs. We develop five-year plans. We make sure that all of our congregations are fitted with correct signage. We look for synergies and metrics. Then we think out of the box, push the envelope, put language to it and circle back so that, at the end of the day, we've achieved a critical mass.

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This is not to discount secular best practices or expertise. Heaven knows the church can learn a lot from the business world. But it is to say that our starting point is our helplessness. Our starting point is to get human agency out of the way.

In a sense, Paul's letter to the Corinthians is a "come to Jesus moment." Do we want wisdom?

Well, here it is—Christ crucified, God's clearest and most complete act of love. Come to Jesus. Do we believe it? Can we live it? This is what people are looking for—to be completely loved by the One who knows us completely.

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that discipleship is "not hero worship but intimacy with Christ." Strangely, that intimacy actually propels us out into the world. In God's love we have been given our life so that, in love, we can give our life away. That is a divine foolishness. □

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