

Midweek Lent, 2010
1 Corinthians 1:18-25
Pastor Thomas Kneser

Fellow travelers on the road to the cross,

Have you ever heard someone try to ridicule God and those who follow him with a question like, "If God is almighty, can he create a stone that is too heavy for him to carry?" They think they are so clever, seemingly turning one of God's attributes against itself, apparently making God's greatest strength into his greatest weakness. In their unconverted mind God then seems to be undone. God is outwitted and made to look like a fool. Right?

But for those who have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit, such seeming contradictions, such logical questions that would seem to disprove the existence of God, those are nothing new. God even has a name for them. We call them "mysteries of the faith." They are divine things that defy human logic. To those who don't believe God's word they are foolishness, and we can add a whole list of so-called impossibilities to the one just mentioned, like:

How can God be three and one at the same time? The mystery of the Trinity is bad math to the world's way of thinking.

How can Jesus be the almighty, all-knowing Son of God and then born of a woman, placed into a manger and needing the care of a peasant woman?

Or, more to the point of our Lenten pilgrimage: How can God be immortal and yet die on the cross?

In the school of the Holy Spirit, we have learned to be at peace with these and dozens of other apparent contradictions in the Bible. And we accept them, not because we check our brains at the door when we walk into church but because, by the power of the Word, the Holy Spirit has enlightened us to sit quietly and to simply bask in the eternal comfort of a God whose ways are not our ways and whose thoughts are so superior to our thoughts that, without Spirit-given faith in the Holy Scriptures, it would all be nonsense.

Today I want to place before you another one of these apparent conundrums. How can the God who demands perfect justice according to his commandments, where every sin must be punished, how can he at the same time be perfectly loving, forgive every sin? Is it possible that the God who himself is holy and in whose presence no unholy person can stand, is it possible for him to deal with the guilt and punishment of our sins?

The answer centers on that one particular Friday some 2000 years ago, on a rocky hill outside the walls of the city of Jerusalem. It's an answer that focuses on why Jesus had to suffer and die, and what that means for sinners like you me.

Oh, we don't like to be told that we are sinners who can do absolutely nothing to save ourselves. But that is the truth we are confronted with by God's holy Law, his commandments which demand perfect love toward him and perfect love toward our fellow human beings. If we are honest with ourselves we are led to the conclusion that we indeed deserve God's punishment, that it should be us hanging on a cross, or being sent to suffer in hell.

But the cross answers the question of how sin is dealt with, other than with our damnation. God sent his one and only son in to this world. As God the Son, Jesus was able to live the sinless life we couldn't. As God he could pay the penalty sinful human beings deserved. As God he was able to shoulder the burden his father placed on him. **The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all**, Isaiah wrote.

That's what Lent and Good Friday focus on, that when the flesh of his hands and feet was ripped apart by those spikes, he was suffering for us. He was enduring the agony of hell as he hung there for those six hours. His love moved him to stay on that cross so that our sins would

be forgiven, so that salvation would be earned for us. That's what should make these midweek Lent devotions a high priority for us. That's what the message of the cross is all about, God sending his son to save us from eternity in hell.

But to the world that message seems utterly ridiculous. What kind of powerful message is that, they ask? What do you mean that man can't save himself, find his own solution to the question of his relationship with God and his eternal existence? Look at all we've accomplished, the machines we've devised, the philosophies we've constructed. Man has proved his power and wisdom in countless ways. Compared to all that, the message of cross is nothing but weakness and foolishness. Surely man can come up with a better solution, without relying on someone who couldn't even keep himself alive in the face of his enemies. His death saves me? The natural heart of man scoffs at such an idea. You're a fool if you believe that Bible nonsense. Where's the power, the impressive demonstration that goes along with it so that man is convinced?

Paul's answer to the Corinthians is still our answer today, **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.**

Of course, that's not what Pontius Pilate saw when Jesus was dragged before him by the Jewish authorities. They made the accusation that he was a rebel, that he taught people to quit paying their taxes, that he had claimed to be a king. But to that savvy politician, Jesus appeared to be nothing more than a foolish intrusion on his busy life. Even though he declared Jesus free of any blame, he chose to display his power by caving in to the riotous demands of the Jewish leaders. As he stared into the face of the one who is truth and power personified, Pilate shrugged it all off, "What is truth?" This Jesus was no one he would have to worry about, no real threat to the power and might of Rome.

The same could be said of the Jewish leaders and the high priest, Caiaphas. They could not fathom the possibility that Jesus actually was the Messiah. They reasoned that the eternal kingdom of God could never be achieved by a man such as Jesus. They were looking for someone who would ensure the survival of Israel as a nation. Because Jesus was a threat to that goal of theirs, Caiaphas said, **"It is better that one man die than that the nation perish."** Jesus simply didn't display the kind of power they were looking for.

Then there was Herod, who had been waiting to see Jesus for a long time. He embodied Paul's statement here that **Jews demand miraculous signs.** He was probably rubbing his hands together in glee when Jesus showed up in his palace. But our Savior did not so much as speak a word.

Or later on, when Jesus was already nailed to the cross, there were the taunts of the soldiers and the robbers, looking for a miracle, **Come down from the cross if you are the Christ of God! Come down and we will believe you!** They didn't see any of that in this man dying on a cross.

And there are many in our world who treat the message of the cross the very same way. But Paul wrote and we are firmly convinced and say with him, **that the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.** We know that through the powerful message of the cross, sin is paid for, hearts are converted. We know because we see that with the eyes of faith. We know what kind of power this is. It changes our lives, this powerful preaching of Christ crucified.

II.

It's also a message of wisdom. The world would definitely disagree. As in Paul's day there is a great deal of emphasis on reason and logic and philosophy. And there's nothing wrong with those things in and of themselves. But when they sit in judgment on God's Word, that's when we have a problem. The message of the cross just doesn't make sense in the world's way of thinking. For the people of Paul's day the cross was a sign of contempt. Someone who died

on a cross must have been the lowest scum of society, someone you didn't even talk about in polite company.

So our preaching of the cross is utter nonsense to man's rational thinking. The idea that the death of a criminal is meaningful for them and their eternal existence? Foolishness! And the Greek word for anyone who believes such foolishness is still part of our language. We call him a moron, someone who seems not to have any sense at all. To believe that some Jew who died on a cross is the Savior, the natural mind of man says that's crazy. To believe that God has to be paid off in blood, that the death of this man cleanses us of all sin, that's a foolish concept that just can't be believed.

And so many people feel compelled to change the message of the cross until it ends up being religious gobbledy-gook. They change Jesus' death from a payment for sin into the sad ending of a leader whose cause failed. They make his life of kindness and gentleness the sole reason to follow him, that he was a fine moral philosopher on the same level as Socrates, Mohammed or Ghandi. The only way of salvation, the one whose death and resurrection have meaning for life, to them that's foolishness, not worth talking about.

There's the stumbling block that the unconverted world trips over every time: God is perfectly merciful, forgiving every sin, and at the same time perfectly just, punishing every sin. Humanly speaking, God is an oxymoron—two irreconcilable things at the same time—a contradiction too big for the human mind to get its hands around.

“Can God punish all sin and at the same time forgive all sin?” These two contradictory facts can only be reconciled one place, the foolish wisdom of the cross. **“We preach Christ crucified”**—because God laid all of the punishment for our sins upon his holy, innocent Son on that cross. On the cross God treated his sinless Son as we sinners should have been treated. **“We preach Christ crucified”**—because the perfect mercy and love of God came to us poor sinners from Jesus' cross. Because of Jesus' cross, God treated rebels, like you and me, as he should only have treated his holy Son!

The foolish wisdom of the cross gives us the confidence to say, **“If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”** Armed with the wisdom that we are God's own dear children because of Jesus' cross, we can face any of the adversities of life or even the terrors of death.

No doubt the greatest burden we must wrestle with in our lives is our own struggle with sin and a guilty conscience. Whenever our hearts condemn us, the wisdom of the cross says, **“It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?”** (Ro 8:33-35).

If we are ridiculed for telling others about the foolishness of the cross, we do not need to be shaken. Until people are led by the Holy Spirit to see themselves as God sees them, they cannot see how wise and indispensable the cross is for their salvation. Through our words, we pray that they may see God's justice against their sin on that cross, so that it may be the loveliest, most desired tree of all.

When evil and violence, suffering and turmoil threaten God's people, the wisdom and power and love of the cross lead us to the humility of childlike faith. That Savior who gave his life and rose again for us also promises to be with us throughout our lives, to the very end of the age. The cross makes us humble students who sit at the feet of our Savior and bask in his love and forgiveness.

Or when death approaches, the wisdom and power of the cross lifts our eyes to the Lord's mercy and compassion that guarantee us safe passage to the new heaven and the new earth, the home of God's elect. Together with the apostle Paul, we can stake our eternal happiness on the

wisdom of Jesus' cross, **God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.** May we always look to that cross of Christ, in life and in death, as the perfect answer to our eternal relationship with God. AMEN.