

## CHURCH AT THE CROSSROADS *The Paradox of Wisdom*

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

September 22, 2024

About six years ago, not long after I arrived at Second, we convened some conversations about upgrading our roadside sign situation. At the time, I learned that some among us refer to the current sign by the driveway as the tombstone. Not exactly the best symbol for a vibrant, lively congregation! Well, the rigors of zoning boards and local jurisdictions can be daunting, and we're still at it. But, in the meantime, I've made myself a student of church signs.

I want to offer for you the preliminary results of my research. Church signs fall into three distinct categories. The first are event announcements. "Organ Concert: This Sunday, 4 pm" (that's true; please come). The second category are short biblical verses or pithy proverbs. "God is Love." "For God so loved the world." And the final category takes up cheesy church jokes. "Seven Days without Prayer Makes One Weak." (I'm sorry.) Most church signs, despite those zoning boards and local jurisdictions, are harmless, but not long ago I read one that I confess irritated me. I won't say which church, but the sign read, "Apply Here: Advancement Guaranteed."

Maybe I should lighten up and appreciate the humor, but when I read those words, I thought of the Apostle Paul. What would he think of this message? I thought of the Christians living in Corinth and the tensions that divided them. I thought of the cross.

Recall that the Corinthian church is in trouble. There is division. There are factions. And I bet there were debates over what the church sign should say. Some argued: "Corinth Presbyterian Church, the most intelligent congregation in town." How about, "Corinth Methodist Church, where the power people pray." Or perhaps, "Corinth Baptist Church, worship each Sunday with a who's who of Corinthian high society." Others, you

recall, were arguing over whose name should appear on the sign. Some wanted to engrave the congregation's founder, the Apostle Paul. Others preferred Apollos, that silver-tongued young preacher. Still others Peter, the rock on which the whole movement was built.

And it is getting heated in the Corinth Session meeting. So, Paul drafts a letter to the church, and according to Paul, here's what belongs on the church sign. Are you ready? "We proclaim Christ crucified. Only fools apply here." Paul insists that there is only one symbol appropriate for the church—a cross. While others debate who is most important, intelligent, impressive, or impactful, Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that *their* salvation stands on a scandalous sign of suffering. We worship a crucified savior. We find the presence of God on a cross.

The message has been controversial from the very beginning. From the outset, some sought ways to smooth over this unseemly symbol. They were creative in their approaches. Some claimed that only the human part of Jesus suffered or died on the cross while the divine part suffered no pain. Others ignored the Apostle's focus on Christ *crucified* and suggested that the resurrection had nullified that unfortunate detail about a detour through death. Concerned about the optics, some early Christians tried to cancel the cross, remove it from their roadside sign. And who can blame them? After all, it's a symbol of weakness. It represents Jesus at his lowest point, makes us look like losers, no way to attract or influence.

And the same tactics of denial and erasure are still being employed. The late theologian and Wabash College professor William Placher suggests that "our culture massively resists a theology of the cross."

The way of costly discipleship is replaced by the gospel of easy success. Apply Here: Advancement Guaranteed. Preachers of prosperity gospels insist that the cross was merely a temporary setback on the way to total triumph, and what's more, that this same success is promised to you if you truly believe. There is no cross to bear.

It's not difficult to understand the appeal. We want, we crave, a victory story. We love a hero's journey. "We proclaim Christ crucified," Paul wrote, "a stumbling block to some and to others utter foolishness." Still true. We shout, "Give us the God from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel—muscular, potent, intimidating, the Christian answer to Zeus. That's what we need."

But then tragedy strikes. The unthinkable loss of a loved one far too soon. Or the test comes back positive. A dream is shattered. A relationship is ended. We watch those we cherish fade. Violence unleashed on the innocent. The world spins ceaselessly in a series of senseless suffering. There is a cross to bear. And then only the Gospel truth of a crucified savior makes any sense at all. Bill Placher again: "God did not stand by and watch someone else die on the cross. God was there. We see how much God loves us."

This weakness is the power of God. This risky, vulnerable power. The most transformative truth the world has ever heard. God's power in human weakness. All our expectations turned upside down.

What if it is true? What if our preoccupation with power and our inflexible insistence on intelligence only serve to separate us from the source of our strength and the path to true wisdom?

The cross confronts us with a choice. A crossroads. We can accept a definition of power as domination. We can do whatever needs done to get ahead despite all collateral damage. We can make the understandable assumption that this world is divided between winners and losers and then work to be sure that we're on the winning side. We can twist the gospel into convoluted knots to justify our actions. And you don't have to look far to find examples. I hear the preachers. *God wants a*

*powerful church.* I've been reprimanded by those who say the way of Jesus has no place in the contemporary context, all this mercy and sacrifice, compassion and selflessness. No, Christians must seek authority in every arena. Dominionism, they call it. A mandate to rule. Forget the cross. Seize the throne.

The crossroads question is crystal clear—what kind of people will we be? Or perhaps more directly—what depiction of divinity deserves our devotion? If we worship power, we will be content to claim it no matter the method. Ends justify the means. We could sell our soul for the perceived success and end up emptier than we began. Somewhere someone said there is no profit in gaining the whole world when you lose your moral courage and your conscience in the process. Friends, no amount of power is worth selling your soul.

And so, in place of this tortured take on discipleship, we proclaim Christ crucified. The costliest of love. The most selfless of sacrifice. A call to serve that comes with a warning: the paradox of wisdom is that it often appears foolish. The paradox of divine power is that it *is* weak by our standards. And yet, this foolishness, this weakness, they offer the only path to life worth living, the only comfort when tragedy strikes.

Next month, our family will spend a few days in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where we will visit my grandmother who recently turned 95 and other members of our extended family two miles away from the tiny hamlet of Nickel Mines. Eighteen years ago, in that peaceful Amish community, a one-room schoolhouse became the scene of a terrible crime, five young children murdered by a troubled man who then took his own life. It was a story of immense and seemingly irreparable pain in such a tranquil community committed to nonviolence.

Evil invaded those sacred spaces, and the story might have ended there, in tragedy and senseless violence. It could have caused a cycle of retribution and vengeance. An eye for an eye. But that's not what happened. Days after the attack we learned what

did happen. The grandfather of one victim said to a reporter, "We must not think evil of this man; he had a mother and a soul."

Thirty members of the Amish community attended the shooter's funeral, and the man's widow was invited to attend the service for the children. In response, she wrote a letter to her Amish neighbors. It was published in the local newspaper. My grandmother cut it out and mailed it to me. She wrote, "The gifts you've given have moved our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has reached beyond my family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you."

Now you might remember that some were offended by that swift and complete attempt at reconciliation offered by the Amish community. Too much. Too soon. It seemed outrageous, unthinkable, madness. *Foolishness*.

Perhaps. Perhaps it was. Or perhaps it simply exposed the madness we call normal: obsession with vengeance, violent retribution, an eye for an eye. Perhaps, by faith, they knew something most of us cannot comprehend. Perhaps those simple words of forgiveness, those acts of compassion, displayed the wisdom and power of God in ways the world will never embrace.

But we, who proclaim Christ crucified, may we pray for the courage to be so wise. Forget the throne. Cling to the cross. Amen.