

March 7, 2021

The Third Sunday in Lent

Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Milan, WI

St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Edgar, WI

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

In the Name of the Father and the ✠ Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'm sure most of you have had a theological discussion with someone who is not a Christian, either never was or – as is becoming more and more common – someone who was raised in the Church but stopped going, usually right around the time they entered high school. Perhaps you initiated the conversation to invite them to come to church. Maybe they started it, asking why you bother going to church when there are so many more important things to do, so many things that are “more real”. When these conversations pop up, we often try to use apologetics to answer their questions. Apologetics does not mean saying you're sorry. The word *apologia* in ancient Greek meant “a defense”, as in a logical argument made in a debate between two opposing sides. You make a defense of your position. When someone attacks the Christian faith, we often respond with reasons why the Bible can be trusted or how history backs up the Scriptures. How the science of archaeology has only added to, not taken away from, our confidence in Biblical truth. Or maybe how there are more documents from more sources that support Jesus as an actual, historical person than any other ancient person who ever lived, period. Maybe you even talk about how the Gospel has changed your life and the lives of thousands of people, arguing from personal experience. But ultimately, none of those arguments create faith, because we do not create faith. If faith were simply a matter of learning some facts or learning an equation, then everyone would believe.

Apologetics only takes you so far. It can, at best, break down the walls of unbelief. But faith comes from hearing the Word of God. And that is where rebellion often takes place, because God doesn't do things the way we think they should be done. We think the rich and powerful should be more important in God's eyes because they are more important in ours. We think the meek and the poor and the humble deserve nothing, because that is exactly how we treat them. We live in an age that has made celebrity the single most important aspect of life. It doesn't matter how well educated you are or what accomplishments you have made in a long career. A sixteen-year old with a cellphone can influence more people than you can, with all of your knowledge and experience, because that teenager is a celebrity with a million followers. Reason won't make someone believe. Your expertise won't break down the walls of unbelief. The only weapon you have is God's Word, which is sharper than any two-edged sword.

And what do the Scriptures reveal to us? That God likes paradoxes, and He revels in contradictions. This is not an accident, but is actually the way He operates, to confound both Satan and our own vanity. This is what Paul was talking about when he wrote to the Church in Corinth. **“God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God**

**chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong”** (v.27). God chose weakness to show His strength. God chose foolishness to show His wisdom. Those things don’t make sense to us, and they’re not supposed to. The Jews expected a mighty king to physically drive out the Romans and rebuild Israel into a powerful nation. They expected a handsome warrior to ride in on a war horse with a sword in His hand, so instead Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, on the moped of animals. And Jesus was not particularly handsome, just ordinary looking. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, **“He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him.”** (Isa. 53:2) Jesus didn’t look like a celebrity and He did not exude power. How foolish to hope in this man, who looked like nothing, who was Himself poor and without a home. And yet that is how the wisdom of God was made manifest.

God doesn’t think the way we think... or perhaps it is better to say, we no longer think the way God does. Adam and Eve experienced this after the Fall into sin. The peaceful garden that was their home suddenly became frightening. The God whom they knew intimately, the God whom they walked with and talked with day after day, they suddenly were afraid of. So the issue isn’t really that God thinks so differently from us. The issue is that we have lost the image of God and sin infects everything, including the way we think. We are broken and incapable of thinking like our Creator. We are incapable of seeing things for how they truly are. And so God reveals Himself in paradoxes. Because faith isn’t an equation. It can only be accepted in the face of contradiction. The wise are made foolish and the strong are put to shame.

After starting his reformation efforts in 1517, Martin Luther participated in a theological debate the very next year in 1518, what is called the Heidelberg Disputation. In this, Luther presented what had only recently become clear to him: That what he had learned about God was largely wrong. He posited that there are two theologies present in the world, a theology of glory and the theology of the cross. He presented these as a series of paradoxes, which draw upon Scripture to present God’s truth over against the way the world thinks. He wrote:

*That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.*

A theologian of glory looks at megachurches with their thousands upon thousands of members, with their Hollywood-style production and multi-million-dollar budgets and says, “They are doing it right, because they have wealth and power and fame.” But a theologian of glory hears the TV preacher and says, “What about Jesus? Where is the cross of Jesus in all of this glamour?” Where is Gospel of the Son of God who died for us?

Paul wrote, **“Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.”** (v. 20-21) The holy, sinless Son of God set aside all of His majesty to die for those who hate Him. That is folly, according to the world. That is foolish, according to the learned. Why would someone so powerful allow Himself to be killed? Why would someone who was innocent allow Himself to be punished like the guilty? This is the unsearchable love of God. We cannot fathom it. It is so foreign to us, so outside our reason and experience that we truly cannot wrap our brains around it. We can only look to the cross of Jesus and gaze in awe upon the depth of His love for us. For you. Does it make sense that God died for you? No, not at all. But in contradictions, in these paradoxes, the wisdom and love of God is found.

**“The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”** (v.18) That is the only answer to those who ask why we “waste” our time going to church when there are so many other things we could be doing. Why we give of our own income so generously and orient our lives around serving others instead of just serving ourselves. We look at the cross and see not a mystery but the answer, the answer to the question that keeps us up at night, that worries at the back of our skull like an itch we cannot scratch. What does God think of me? Does He despise me for my many dark sins? We look at the cross of Jesus and we have the answer, an answer which makes no sense, and yet is the sum of truth: God loves me, a sinner, enough to send His Son to die for me. To pay my debt and win me back from hell. In His powerlessness hanging on the cross, He shows us real power. In His last moments, surrounded by scorn and hate, He revealed what real love is.

Keep having those conversations. Keep making a defense for the hope you have within you. But don't forget that the best argument for our faith isn't logical. It is a paradox that cannot be solved, only embraced. The Good News of Jesus doesn't make sense, yet it changes hearts and gives new life. The sinless Son of God thinks that you are important enough to die for. And rising from the grave, He presents you with the crown He earned. As theologians of the cross, you see God for whom He really is and that is why we have peace and joy.

In Jesus' holy name, Amen.

Rev. Schopp