

“A BUNCH OF NONSENSE”
1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
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When I was in my hometown of Corpus Christi, Texas, over the Christmas holidays, I stopped into Macy’s to buy a sweater for a member of my family. I was struck by the fact that the selection of sweaters was extremely limited, as was the selection of long-sleeved shirts and heavy coats. Here in Connecticut, cold weather apparel is stocked in abundance and is an easy sell; but in South Texas, where it can be 80 degrees on Christmas Day, cold weather apparel is a tough sell.

Now, just as there are regional differences in the market for winter clothing, so there are regional differences in the market for religion. Having lived in both Texas and Connecticut, I’ve noticed that religion is a relatively easy sell in the Lone Star State but a tough sell in the Nutmeg State. You and I live in a locale that is as far from the Bible Belt as the North is from the South. Church participation in New England is relatively slim compared to other parts of the country. With each passing year, it seems to become harder for congregations in our area to gain new adherents or keep the adherents we already have. I hear church people speculate all the time about why this is the case.

My own take is that those who disavow religion – in New England or anywhere else – fall into at least three categories. First, some people are just thoroughly secular: they are attuned to the material world and have no desire to make contact with a spiritual world. A second group has had some religious upbringing, but they’ve been disillusioned by the shortcomings of institutional Church and have dropped off the membership rolls in masses. And then, there is a third group which I find the most fascinating and is perhaps the easiest for you and me to identify with. This group is comprised of persons who are genuine “seekers” after meaning and truth but have not found what they are seeking in religious faith – at least not yet.

Many of these seekers have been trained to look for truth in modern science, which claims to be grounded in concrete proofs and observable facts. Religion, by contrast, seems to be based on belief in things which cannot be seen, touched, and verified with certainty. Many seekers would believe in God – if God would just do them the courtesy of demonstrating his presence and power in obvious ways.

Seekers may regard the truth-claims of religion to be unreasonable or unfathomable. They say, “How can one believe in life after death when there is no tangible proof of any existence beyond the grave?” Or, “How can one believe in prayer when the One to whom we are praying is invisible and doesn’t reply to us in an audible voice?” For many seekers, the doctrines and rituals of Christianity are reminiscent of Winston Churchill’s famous description of Communist Russia: they are “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” I’m reminded of the story told by the late Cardinal Cushing from his days as a young priest. He was once called to the side of an accident victim and found himself asking this man, “Do you believe in one God in three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?” The reply came back, “Here I am dying, and you’re asking riddles.”

In sum, many seekers would like to believe the truth-claims of Christianity, but these claims haven't been verified in their own experience, or they just seem like a bunch of nonsense. I confess that I have a lot of empathy for seekers because I have been one myself and have pastored a lot of church people who are also seekers. These folks appreciate being part of a faith community where they feel a sense of belonging, a fellowship that cares for its own and shows compassion for its neighbors. But for these church-going seekers, the difficult doctrines of Christianity are a tough sell. They would like more certifiable proof, more sensible reasons to believe, before they say without reservation, "I believe."

I get that. It's not asking too much to desire evidence to support the truth-claims of Christianity. Who among us hasn't wished for God to demonstrate his power more forcibly in a world that is rife with violence and suffering? Who among us hasn't wished for the risen Christ to appear to us as he does to the first apostles?

Nor is it asking too much to desire a faith that makes good sense in a scientific age. 400 years ago, the astronomer Galileo was accused of heresy by the Roman Catholic Church for claiming that the earth revolves around the sun, rather than the other way around – a claim that seemed to pose a threat to biblical teaching. However, scientific reason ultimately prevailed and Galileo's views were vindicated, even by the Church.

When our spiritual forebear, John Wesley, identified the sources for Christian belief, he cited Scripture as the primary source; but he said that our beliefs should also be shaped by tradition, experience, and reason – yes, reason! John Wesley didn't leave his thinking cap at the door when he entered a Christian sanctuary, and neither should we. When you and I confess our faith, we want to confess something that is credible, not incredible.

Now, one might suppose that this desire for a credible faith is a purely modern phenomenon, the product of a rational, scientific age. But notice that this same desire is expressed two thousand years ago when the Christian movement is just getting started. In his 1st letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul identifies two groups of people who are seekers after religious truth but are resistant to believing in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

First, Paul refers to his fellow Jews, noting that "Jews ask for signs" (1 Corinthians 1:22a). Jews believe that God intervenes in history and displays his power in dramatic, discernible ways. They certainly expect their long-awaited Messiah to show signs of his messiahship. In today's Gospel lesson, when Jesus cleanses the temple of merchants and money-changers, the religious leaders question both his actions and his credentials. They ask, "What miracle can you perform to show us that you have the right to do this?" (John 2:18). Do you hear it? These Jews are looking for signs and wonders; they want Jesus to provide indisputable evidence that his authority and power come from God.

And then, Paul points to a second group of religious seekers, the Greeks, observing that "Greeks look for wisdom" (1:22b). The Greeks prize the intellect above all other human faculties. They are rational thinkers, and they seek a religious faith that is reasonable. The Greeks don't suffer fools gladly, and they turn a deaf ear to any religious leader or idea which appears to them to be foolish.

Now, you can be sure that Paul sympathizes with the concerns of these Jews and Greeks. Paul himself is a Jew who initially rejects the claims of the new Christian movement because he

lacks hard evidence that Christ is the Messiah. He believes only when he is given a sign, when the risen Christ appears to him on the Damascus Road. By the same token, Paul places a high value on human wisdom, just like the Greeks. He begins his career as a learned rabbi, and he doesn't put his rational mind into a deep freeze when he converts to Christianity. To the contrary, Paul's sermons and letters are carefully reasoned; he argues his points with razor-sharp clarity. Whether he is counseling wayward Christians in the church at Corinth or debating Stoic philosophers on Mars Hill in Athens, Paul exercises wisdom and wants his fellow Christians to do the same.

In sum, Paul sympathizes with the desire for a faith based on concrete evidence and reasonable thinking – but only up to a point. There is one feature of the Christian message which Paul acknowledges to be absurd by human standards. The gospel is grounded in an event which is scandalous to Jews and foolishness to Greeks, an event whose meaning remains a mystery and defies all logic. He is referring, of course, to the cross of Jesus Christ.

Remember, the Jews are awaiting a Messiah who will prove his divine status by overthrowing the hated Romans, establishing himself as king, and restoring Israel to her former glory. The last thing the Jews are looking for in a Messiah is one who agonizes and dies on a Roman cross. Likewise, the Greeks will only worship a figure who thinks and acts like a real god and is immune to suffering and death. The last thing they are seeking in a god is who one is also fully human, whose flesh is torn asunder like a piece of meat and whose blood pours out in a river of red.

The cross of Christ, Paul says, is “a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1:23b). The apostle makes this observation in the 1st Century; but the truth is, the cross is still a stumbling block in the 21st Century – not only for unbelievers and seekers, but also for committed people of faith. Yes, even the Church feels ambivalent toward the cross of Christ.

If you want examples of this, think about the crosses that adorn church buildings all over the world today. Sanctuary crosses are usually sanitized and made of shiny brass or gold – a far cry from “the old rugged cross” upon which Christ died. Or think about the crosses you and I like to wear around our necks. Our crosses are beautiful ornaments purchased in a jewelry store which bear no resemblance to instruments of death.

Or think about the way we're prone to approach the sacred meal set before us this morning, a meal which offers such a bitter foretaste of the cross. You and I may treat the elements of the Lord's Supper – bread and wine – as pleasant appetizers before Sunday dinner, when in fact they are symbols of Christ's broken body and shed blood.

Or think about the typically low attendance at Holy Week services in churches throughout the world. For many Christians, trudging through Holy Week is like watching a family member in the last stages of a terminal illness. Is it any wonder that we want to skip over the ominous news of Maundy Thursday and the bad news of Good Friday and go straight to the good news of Easter? We want the glory of the resurrection without the pain of the cross.

Friends, no matter what part of the country we live in, the cross is a tough sell. In the 21st Century no less than the 1st, you and I want our leaders to be powerful and successful; but the cross of Christ is a sign of weakness and defeat. There is no logic in the claim that God takes a tragedy like Christ's death and transforms it into triumph. A lot of Christians still have trouble

believing that God's love and power are most clearly demonstrated in the crucifixion of God's only Son.

And yet, this is precisely what Paul calls us to believe, knowing full well that the cross will always be just a bunch of nonsense to some people. But to others, to those who suffer in body and seek consolation and healing, or to those who suffer in spirit and seek forgiveness and reconciliation, the cross has a curious logic about it. For them, the cross is the truest expression of the wisdom and power of God.

In his moving book, *Stations of the Heart*, Rick Lischer tells about the death of his son Adam, a promising law student with a lovely wife who was pregnant with their first child. One day while this young man was battling cancer, the father and son looked into a church and saw a crucifix. The sight of Christ on the cross prompted them to know that this was the place for them – for such a church, and such a God, says Lischer, “is not freaked out by death.”

Friends, the good news is that God is not freaked out by death, not freaked out by suffering, and not freaked out by sin. In Christ, God shares in our death, identifies with our suffering, and embraces our sin. And he does all of this, not by sitting on a throne but by dying on a cross. It's a tough sell, but I'm buying.