

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 Foolish Things

I know many of you do not care all that much about sports. I like them, and am tempted to be inspired by the stories of its champions. Through the years I have noticed that many Christians are attracted to other believers when they become champions and witness to their faith. I think that is what Tebow-mania was about, just to give one example. It makes us feel good when Christians are successful. Should it?

There is another side, we are also ashamed and sometimes embittered by their failures, not competitive failures but moral and ethical ones. Should we be? Might we be a little too attached to the idea that God uses earthly success? Paul wrote:

“We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block and a folly . . .

1 Corinthians 1

1 Corinthians 1 is a very rich and multifaceted jewel of a chapter in this jewel of a letter; in all of Paul’s letters; in all of the Bible. It has only been a couple of years since it was the focus of a sermon here. The last time, I contrasted the “ways of the world” with “gospel ways.”

I found it difficult to view “worldly wisdom” in a positive light. It still seems difficult to reach the conclusion that the this-worldly emphasis on pride and success and

pleasure and power compares to the gospel emphasis on humility and service and sacrifice and love. I said things like:

“The homiletic trick is to make the value system of the world look good and then pop it like a balloon with the obviously superior values of the bible. The trouble is that we live in a time in history when the “wisdom of the world,” is not so easily made to look good. One sees corruption in business, politics, and sports; one sees absurdities in both personal lives and the larger realms of national and international relationships.” and:

“In order to cope with the situation, some look for heroes and there are no real heroes. . .” Finally,

“The wisdom of the world isn’t looking so wise. The world no longer needs preachers like Paul preaching “Christ crucified” to show up the blemishes of the world’s wisdom. It looks pretty foolish on its own.”

Divine foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. That seems clear and makes sense. It doesn't seem out of place, either a stumbling block or a folly to say so.

Today, therefore, I would like to go in a slightly different direction and think about the folly of the cross with an emphasis less on ideas and values than on people.

Cross

The first thing to say is that the cross *is* a very upside-down thing. It *is* a stumbling block and a folly. The gospel claim is that an executed criminal is the savior of the world. It speaks for itself and will always be difficult to accept.

It is also true that human wisdom *can* make a strong case for itself. It can hold up reason, common-sense, mathematical and empirical verification as the foundation of rational living that *should benefit* the largest number of the world's people.

That things don't always work out is the result of corruptions in humanity that disrupt rational harmonies and defy "nature." One can easily blame the failures on ignorance and superstition.

Even in the world's value system, it is well-known that self/lessness is better than self/ishness, humility is better than arrogance, healthy personal relationships are better than fame and fortune and that money can't buy love; meaning does not come from financial wealth and possessions.

The competition between the "ways of the world" and the "way of the gospel" has ambiguities, and will always make for a good sermon and interesting dinner conversation.

People

There is something else in Paul's argument. He not only speaks of the folly of the cross, but of the lowliness of the people of the cross. He says, "not many of you were much by worldly standards; not many of noble birth. . ."

Paul's claim is that it is the *ordinary* people in whom God works to powerfully demonstrate God's holiness and righteousness, and through whom redemption comes. Shall we reflect about this for a few minutes?

A caveat: Paul is not claiming that everyday people are better than the nobility, the elites. I have lived all my life among the ordinary people and can attest that they are as ornery and selfish as anyone.

"Ordinary" folks are no less corrupted by sin than the elites. "Middle class" morality is not better or worse than any other kind. The truth that Paul is highlighting is that *God* has chosen the foolish things, the weak things, the low things; in order ultimately so that no one could take the credit but in the end be forced to praise God.

Foolish Things

This idea does not mean that the foolish things are not foolish; the weak things weak, or the low things low. My advice is that if you are trying to lift a heavy load

and you have the choice in help of someone who is strong and someone who is weak, pick the strong one.

If you are trying to navigate a medical situation and the choice is between the best doctors and run-of-the-mill mediocre doctors, pick the best ones. As often as not, you will get what you pay for.

Paul isn't saying that the foolish, weak, and low things are better; Paul is saying God has chosen to work through them. We should not infer that God has chosen them *because* they are better suited. That would be a mistake, especially if it led to a plan to *be* foolish in order to be chosen. All human wisdom is foolish.

It makes no sense to plan to be foolish or weak or low in order to be chosen by God. It only makes sense that God chooses the foolish things, because in the end, what choice is there? All human wisdom is foolish, all human strength is weak, all human height is low. The cross is meant to humble us.

The believers of the Old Testament also recognized this truth and had a verse for it, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone." Psalm 118:24

The Church

On the one hand we should be encouraged that God has chosen to be embodied in us, that, all our

shortcomings and failures and weaknesses notwithstanding, God has included us, even though we are not much by worldly standards.

On the other hand we should remain humble, because we have not been chosen by merit but by grace. We do not deserve and can not achieve our calling. It is an intellectual, physical, emotional, and moral constraint that hinders us, causes us to be undeserving.

As for the church, it looks to be pretty much broken. It is not well organized, divided, underfunded, always on the precipice of further fragmentation and forever threatened by absurdities and disharmony, and hypocrisy. It should be humble.

The cross is the world's failure. The temptation is to look away from it, as we do from poverty and disease and war; and on the personal level, away from our brokenness, to find other solutions.

But the folly of the cross is that it *is* the solution, it is God's triumph. Our salvation is found by looking to it, not away from it, because when we look at it, in it, we find God's grace, upon this grace, and only on this grace, we should depend.

We do not need triumphant heroes, might even be hindered by them. We have the crucified Christ, it is enough to hope in Him.

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