

When you came into the church this morning, one of the things that I hope your attention was drawn to was the cross behind me. If there is one thing I desire for this church it is that the cross of our Lord and Savior be lifted up. To me, there is no more powerful idea than the cross of Jesus Christ.

I believe that there is an awesome power in the cross of Christ. It's amazing how an instrument of death that was originally one of cruelty, suffering and shame has now become a symbol of endurance, love, and hope. It is no wonder that Paul could look to the cross with all its shame and sorrow and say what he said in **Galatians 6:14**, "**May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.**"

Yet the cross has not always received a warm welcome. There are those who live their lives as enemies of the cross and want nothing to do with the cross or its message. One church in California had all of its crosses taken down from the sanctuary because they deemed them to be depressing and divisive. Many of you remember how much controversy came with Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*. And not just from non-Christians, but from some Churches as well. *John Beukema, is a minister in Western Springs, Illinois, and he told about how his church rented a theater to watch The Passion of the Christ on opening weekend. He wrote, "Afterward we gathered for dinner, discussion, and prayer. I returned home in a somber mood, deeply reflecting upon the sacrifice of Christ.*

When I opened my mail that night, the first letter was from a local church, inviting me to visit their "special community." They listed the ways they were unique:

- No religious dogma. We encourage the freedom of individual thought and belief. A humanist view of life. Our faith is based on celebrating the inherent worth and dignity of every person.
- Our children's religious education program. We teach our kids to be accepting of differing beliefs and the importance of each person seeking his or her own truth. They study the world's major religions and draw on the core values of each faith tradition.
- So if you're looking for a congregation that cherishes freedom of belief and opinion, with a warm sense of community and fellowship, please visit us!

He added, "I had watched the horrific suffering of Jesus and heard him say, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Hours later I opened an invitation to visit a group where truth doesn't matter. The contrast was overwhelming."

Now not all dismiss the cross because they despise the cross. Some may with good intentions dismiss the cross because in an effort to reach people for Christ they deem the cross as something that people do not want to hear. One pastor who attended a church seminar on church growth strategies was shocked when a pastor of a well known “mega-church” offered this advice. He said, “He said, “Don’t tell people about the cross, it doesn’t work. Just tell them that God loves them and has a plan for them.” The proof that allegedly validated his approach was that he had big Church. But note his point: The message of a crucified Jew is ridiculous to the modern mind and an ineffective tool for Church Growth. So move on to something better. A crucified Messiah is silly to most, so promise them prosperity, give them emotional experiences, provide them with self esteem – then you’ll fill the pews.”

Now I have a few problems with this mans assessment. First, our goal is not to simply fill pews. What good is it if you fill a church seat but keep that person away from Christ? Second, you can’t have Christianity without the cross. The cross stands at the center of the Christian faith. Just listen to a few of these verses and notice the centrality of the cross: **Luke 18:31**, “Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, “We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.” The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about.” **Galatians 2:20** “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” **1 Corinthians 2:2**. “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” The cross is at the center of all that we do as Christians. Jesus defined his own purpose and mission in going to the cross.

Third, for the sake of the reaching folks for the Gospel some are willing to adjust the Gospel and we don’t have that right. In an attempt to make Christianity more appealing they try to make it less harsh and leave out the cross and its message. But the apostle Paul wrote about those who would change the Gospel. Listen to what he wrote in **Gal 1:8-10**, “. ⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! ⁹ As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! ¹⁰ Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.”

All of this relates to the same sorts of temptation being faced at the Church in Corinth. If the cross is scandalous today, imagine how it was when seeing someone nailed to a piece of wood suffering a slow agonizing death was part of your everyday world. In their world in the first century crucifixion was a thing of shame, scorn and derision. It was reserved for only the most lowly of crimes and the most viscous of criminals. To Jews it was a hateful thing. **Deuteronomy 21:23** says, “**Anyone hung on a tree is a under God’s curse.**” The Jewish historian Josephus observed many crucifixions and he said it was, “The most wretched deaths.” There is the “Alexamenos Graffito”, which comprises some of the first ever anti-Christian graffiti from Rome and it depicts a picture of a person worshipping a man on a cross with a donkey for a head.

Sensing the shame, humiliation and scandal of the cross, the Corinthians evidently thought it best to forget about the cross and move onto higher things. They were captivated with displays of spiritual power, the kind of power they could boast about, like prophecy, tongues, miracles and earthly wisdom. They didn’t want to glory in the cross, but instead relished in any display of spiritual power that would elevate and exalt themselves. They wanted the glory of Christ without the cross of Christ. . To some within the church, the cross seemed to be a foolish message that needed to be abandoned.

But the apostle Paul would have none of that. His response is that to go beyond the cross is not to move on but is to abandon Christ altogether. Paul would not abandon the cross because he himself had felt the transforming power of the cross. This morning I want us to see that power by looking at the foolishness of the Cross of Jesus Christ, and by looking at the foolishness, we will see the wisdom of God.

Now the first thing I want us to look at here is that how we tend to view the cross is dependent largely in part to what side of the cross we are on. Look at vs. 18, “**For 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.**”

Now Paul says that there are two views of the cross; one by those who are perishing and the other by those who are being saved. To those who are perishing, the cross seems like the most foolish thing in the world. Now why would the cross be seen as foolish? Well Paul says in vs 23 that the cross was a stumbling block for the Jews. And today it is not only for the Jews but for many others who tend to stumble at the cross because of the apparent weakness of the cross. In 1900, a German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, dismissed Christ's suffering, calling the "concept of God on a cross, preposterous." In recent times the Oxford scholar Alfred Heir wrote a

paper evaluating world religions, and he called Christianity "the worst of all because it rests on the idea of a suffering Savior and a substitutionary atonement, which is intellectually contemptible and morally outrageous." Savors don't suffer, they save. That's the thinking. Over the past few weeks we have hit hard on this, but I think it is very important to be reminded that the people were not looking forward to a suffering Messiah. To them, suffering Messiah was an oxymoron, like hot-ice cream or short sermon, the two just didn't go together.

And its like that for many people as well. They love Jesus, but hate the cross. *Newsweek* religion editor Kenneth L. Woodward wrote an article about what it was that separated Christianity from other religions. He writes, "Clearly, the cross is what separates the Christ of Christianity from every other Jesus. In Judaism there is no precedent for a Messiah who dies, much less as a criminal as Jesus did. In Islam, the story of Jesus' death is rejected as an affront to Allah himself. Hindus can accept only a Jesus who passes into peaceful *samadhi*, a yogi who escapes the degradation of death. The figure of the crucified Christ, says Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, "is a very painful image to me. It does not contain joy or peace, and this does not do justice to Jesus." He then adds, "That the image of a benign Jesus has universal appeal should come as no surprise. That most of the world cannot accept the Jesus of the cross should not surprise, either." The idea of a suffering Messiah (or even just a suffering prophet) doesn't seem to fit with their definition of glory. The Jews wanted a Messiah who displayed power, glory and might, not a crucified peasant. And many today want to put their faith in one who conquers with might, not with humility. So the apparent weakness of the cross causes many to stumble over it.

Some stumble over the cross because of its weakness and other stumble over the cross because of the apparent absurdity of it all. Look at **1 Cor 1:20-21**, "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe."

You know many of us have heard the Christian message so many times that we have lost the idea of just how bizarre it is. I came across a minister in Australia who was trying to help his congregation appreciate this and so he presented the Gospel story with a spin. I asked my wife if I should read this and she gave me the green light on it, so let me say before hand blame her. He began his message this way: "I would like you all to play make believe with me for a moment. Pretend that my name is Jose

Samblanco and I have just arrived off the boat from Peru and I'm proclaiming to you the good news that a Peruvian peasant by the name Carlos Hernandez was electrocuted on the electric chair for your sins. I've even written a hymn:

Carlos was there on that horrible chair
They tied him down with bolts and then zapped him with 40
000 volts
It was for you that our Carlos fried and died
Despite the fact that his hair caught on fire, this one is God's
Messiah.
The wisdom of the world has been refuted because Carlos was
electrocuted
He is my Carlos and my lamp, because he absorbed every
deadly amp
Now I know that God does care, 'cause he sent Carlos
Hernandez to the electric chair

I've also written other hymns like, "In the chair of Carlos I Glory" and "When I cling to that old rugged electric chair". He then he asks the question, "Now what would your response to that be."

Now most would say that doesn't make any sense at all. And the cross doesn't. That is why many people look at the cross and scoff and say, this is silly. The Gentiles in Corinth loved learning and wisdom and would gather around to hear any new philosophy and entertain its ideas. But all ideas were evaluated on how well they conformed to what they thought was reasonable. They believed in a God of reason, but it must be a god who was reasonable on their terms. That's why the Roman historian Tacitus called Christianity a "pernicious superstition". Pernicious means (and I had to look it up) dangerous and destructive.

The word Paul uses for "foolishness" can be understood to mean "mania" or "madness." Gentiles wrote off the message of the cross not as harmless folly, but as dangerous, almost deranged. Isn't that how many people view Christians today. We are seen by many as not simply harmless fools, but as dangerous enemies of enlightened society. Now I hope this is by no means her understanding of Christianity, but Janet Reno was interviewed on "60 Minutes" on June 26, 1999 and she was asked to define a cultist, and this is what she said. "A cultist is one who has a strong belief in the Bible and the Second Coming of Christ; who frequently attends Bible studies; who have a high level of financial giving to a Christian cause; who home schools their children; who has accumulated survival foods and has a strong belief in the Second Amendment; and who distrusts big government.

Any of these may qualify a person as a cultist but certainly more than one of these would cause us to look at this person as a threat and his family as being in a risk situation that qualifies for government interference." I guess that would qualify me as a cultist. I thought you had to shave your head and bang a tambourine. But this is how many folks view Christians. Dangerous simpletons.

But you know what...that's okay. The world may look at the message of the cross and say it doesn't make sense, and you are mad if you believe in it, but like Paul those of us who are being saved, we know it is the power of God. [Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia Spoke to the Knights of Columbus Council in Baton Rouge, Louisiana a while back and he said:](#) "God assumed from the beginning that the wise of the world would view Christians as fools and he has not been disappointed. If I have brought any message today, it is this: Have the courage to have your wisdom regarded as stupidity. Be fools for Christ. And have the courage to suffer the contempt of the sophisticated world."

The foolishness of God is wiser then man's wisdom. And the message of cross is pretty simple...Christ died for you. You can say that Jesus was a good man, that He knew a lot about God, but if you leave out the cross, you've missed the message. Christ died for you. As foolish as the cross may sound to some, you can't ignore it. And the truth be told, the most foolish thing anyone can do, would be to reject it.